

A Leader's Voice

Applied, post-heroic leadership, shaping “accelerating capabilities to achieve the most supreme results”

- April 2023 -

We interview Henrik Wiberg, leader at the Open Innovation Arena (OIA) working with organisational innovation at an international industrial company. Henrik has in many ways evolved his organisation with “post-heroic” principles, where collective wisdom, instead of KPIs, serves as the control mechanism. Where continuous conversations rather than a multitude of reports, act as the information vessels. All-in-all a setup and culture allowing innovation, engagement and creativity to thrive..

We wish to share his way of leading holistically, applying post-heroic practices to enable emergence in a complex environment.

Enjoy your read.

/Karin, Niklas & Patrik

Interview

Henrik, our curiosity revolves around how you are running your organisation, how you do it? What have you noticed works in the way you lead your organisation, and what needs extra care and attention? But where do we start?

Well, where do we start? My curiosity is for instance triggered, when a colleague unexpectedly does something extraordinary. What happened? What are the conditions that allow unexpected extraordinary results? When someone does great things that you don't expect at all?

I have now been a manager for just over 10 years. I started by setting goals. Already from the start I questioned this. Should you set goals? Should you have goals? And I felt that it was challenging. Complicated dialogues was often the main result. At group level, nothing really happened. On an individual level you could point and push thanks to the goal settings, but nothing really happened there either. So it didn't really work. Something was kind of itchy, didn't feel right. We still have so much to do, but nothing is happening.

My curiosity has led me to dive into theories about complex systems. The dos and don'ts. I have been reading up on the insights about complex systems, and how one should act in and alongside complex systems. What is a feedback loop? What is it to lead and manage? Based on this, I've been able to start experimenting with what you can call control. Steering and direction, and sense of direction and sense of action.

If I look in the rearview mirror from where we stand now, I can see that it has been a while where we have seen accelerating capabilities to achieve the most supreme results. It seems impossible to explain. How does this happen? What the hell happened?

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That is a very interesting story. Abandoning all traditional leadership practices in favour of emergent practices and dialogue. And in doing so, experiencing a leverage of organisational results. Have you met any objections along the way?

We had a risk analysis with the union last fall. There were 50+ people in my group. The reaction from unions and their safety representatives was "This can't work, you're working yourself to death!" And I reflected on it. "No, I don't. I have just over 50 people and I have a fairly calm situation. Work-wise and stress-wise.

So, objections from the traditional perspectives of the organisation.

Yes exactly. - "More than 20 people and you will kill yourself. - We know that!". But I had somewhat over 50 people, and it was calm. And what I could see was that I had very little time booked. I have time to move around. And things happen all the time. There is nothing that is not in a conversation. So most days here, I don't even unpack the computer. And right now I actually don't even know where it is...

50 + direct reports in your group, and you experience calm days and very little time booked. That is quite astonishing. Please tell us how a working day might look for you.

So, I usually don't unpack the computer, because leadership is a constant conversation. A continuous co-creation. And in that I notice that leadership is done in conversation. To understand where the person is. In every way. How is he doing? What does she look like? Where are the eyes. Does he stand on his heels, toes? Hands in her pockets? Can we sit down and talk in peace and calm? And then I can guide. Guide individuals in the moment they are in. And in that moment all goals and targets become redundant. All follow-up meetings unnecessary. All control systems can be put aside. I don't do any of it. I free up the maximum amount of time just to understand "Where are we?". What happens then is that I get the opportunity to listen to the feedback that comes to me, which is always about where they are stuck. Where we are stuck. It could be that they don't dare, lack the tools, or skills. That it is difficult, that it feels strange. And then I can work specifically on what is important, right away. And they don't have to think about what I want to hear, or what would be appropriate to talk about in a one-on-one.

Previously, every time I did express goals and direction I see; "Aha, this is what Henrik wants to hear". And then everything is about that. And everything that is important, that keeps the person or project stuck, ends up in the shadows. And we spend time not talking about what's really important. And it's nobody's fault. Just a result of how we humans' function.

Very, very interesting. You really describe a conversation-based leadership. Where you free up maximum time and can offer maximum guidance and support for your direct reports. Do you see the traditional hierarchy being in the way here?

I've been reflecting about the depth of a hierarchy. If the number of layers is a problem. And...depth is not the obstacle. The obstacle is tied to the type of information that gets through the hierarchy, how we talk to each other. For which reason do I speak to a greater audience? What do I say? What intention do I hold in my communication?

Usually we have goals at the top level cascaded down the organisation. What often happens is that a person at the bottom of the chain looks up and says; -"This is what they want to hear, this is the language, then this is what I will report about". Then the dialogue is

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predetermined. The things we talk about gets fixed. We focus on a volume target, or a cost target or a time target and so on. And people report and talk about that and virtually only that in different facets. But that may not be where people are stuck. And often I hide if I don't meet my personal goals, to make my boss happy, who has to make his boss happy, and so on.

In a way, you end up backwards. The pyramid becomes 40,000 people sitting around trying to make 1000 people happy who makes 100 happy who make 1 happy

So, the intention of what is communicated is key. And how we hold conversations. Your observation of how goals cascaded top down have a tendency to narrow down organisational dialogue to only that perspective is very interesting. Ending up in trying to make the one at the top happy. What have you seen instead? As a better way?

We should turn it around, so the one at the top can make 40,000 happy. I got a chance to turn this up-side-down with my group. One of the reasons for growing the group was this too, to test. Now my group is so big, so ordinary group management becomes absurd. I simply can't manage like an ordinary group manager. I have an excuse not to do the typical management, it simply doesn't work. And it isn't an issue if Henrik isn't being the typical manager, setting up all these meetings, reports and all these things, because it's not possible. Each individual has to take responsibility for this herself. And then it grows, and, aha, it really does grow. Flourish. Evolves into something far beyond my own imagination.

I know that I have shortcomings. Everyone does. One of them is that in conversations I have a habit of thinking things through, a lot, too much. Always holding and communicating many different perspectives. I did an organised feedback and called the group together once to put a number of administrative procedures in place. A comment I received from a colleague was like: "It's so good with you Henrik, you've really thought everything through"... and I, "Oh, no, what are you saying... do I always do that? Is that how I am felt? Perceived?" Doing so limits the engagement and initiative and closes down the movement, so I have to be careful about that.

And I am aware of that, through the behaviour I model, I express very high expectations on my surroundings. One feedback I received from my previous boss was that I am extremely cognitively demanding.

Turning the "communication pyramid" upside down. Intriguing! It is also refreshing that you seek feedback and actively reflect on the shadow-sides of your leadership. Can you please explain why you get feedback as cognitively demanding by your previous manager

Let's take the Single, Double- triple loop awareness as one frame. I am in conversation with my manager, and I naturally hold triple loop awareness to both my own actions and to organisational phenomena.

In this any dialogue can become complex, when the one I am talking with "wants" it simple. For example: if we are talking about the employee satisfaction survey. We want to share the satisfactory index figure for the past month, to act on low figures. And I see and want to include the reasons behind and a range of possible surrounding factors and say, "Can we talk about this too, to widen perspectives, and how about..." and so on. That can be perceived as demanding. Especially with people who want simple answers.. But, we can't just do the one thing, extra thoughts, additional perspectives and questioning our underlying assumptions are required all the time...

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So, for those with a preference in single loop, multiperspective and questioning of assumptions may be challenging?

Yes, for those who are in the quick action phase. Tied to this, I've noticed that I can have a rather tough effect on achievers. [Searching for external approval and recognition]. "When will Henrik be satisfied?" I may not have it on my radar to express clearly; "What a good job." "Well done". Maybe I'm not very good at giving medals. I can be very happy and think they are fantastic, and I am truly ecstatic about the results we make. But I may not express myself the way the achiever wishes.

How does this play into the way you build your organisation? The absence of holding the achiever firmly in his achiever role. You don't say "Oh, how good you did, here is your medal". Could this create something else, maybe a bridge for people to grow? What do you see?

Well, maybe it does, but I need to have others in the team with me who take a moderator role. This is why other people in the team, such as for example Martin and Konstantin, are so important. They can also model my behaviour and it is not just something that the weird superior does. It becomes the norm, it just is. When there are others acting and being like this, it becomes the way we are. A social community.

And if it can be a bridge for people to grow? Yes, I believe so. I notice one person in the group who is our most extreme achiever, whom I hired as an achiever for the areas where we really need to achieve. That individual has developed more colours in our culture and way of doing things. Still very strong achiever but definitely broadened. That is growth!

But with strong achievers in particular, I have to watch out. Really watch out, because they can run until they die, because I don't give them the kind of feedback they want.

Others in the group modelling that same behaviour and show a possible way of being. Of course! Brilliantly important! And to be careful so that the achievers don't exhaust themselves in lack of traditional Achiever recognition.. "I didn't get my diploma, so I have to run another mile?"

Yes, just as you also have to watch out when raising kids. Children too can sense unspoken demands, and when they don't understand where the demands are coming from, their own interpretations and guesses will arise. It's terrible, it's like fumbling in the dark.

I see great learning with what we do. We give people the power to do things, and evolve in ways that they themselves could never dream of. People do reflect on that and say things like "I was brought up and educated in a Persian school with caning and all sorts of things, but here you say, bloom as who you are, and I can actually bloom here! Because there is openness and collaboration and intention to grow, mutually. It's absolutely incredible."

Wow! People really growing. Doing things beyond their own imagination. That is powerful! What conditions do you see making that possible?

Conditions... Hard to put a specification down, ha ha. It has grown out of persistent modelling, where I am very careful about how I express myself. Which language I use. Because certain language, clarity in many cases, has an extreme cost. The cost, in many cases, is the killing of desire, of own initiative, of a sense of safety in the self, the feeling that "I actually engage here, from who I am, in my way". "That I get to contribute in my own way here. And that it matters that I am me."

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“That it matters that I am me”. That is beautiful. And what an interesting insight you have made, that clarity can become limiting. Making people unfree to make their own interpretations. To bring their gifts. That things are already defined

Yes, and in that definition lies an expectation on delivery, as I, someone else, defines it. It is not necessarily harmful and limiting to express things explicitly to each other, but I am careful about it in the greater picture.

But sometimes clarity is needed of course. There are several dimensions to it. Sometimes it may be necessary to draw a line in the sand, but it depends entirely on the context and the person. In general, too much clarity has quite large costs. Process control, telling how and what...

But sometimes you need to pause, and reflect. What became of this? Is this going in the right direction? With the right intention? And that's where I spend a lot of my time. If you see or sense something that looks strange, technical, cultural, logical, or systemic. Or if there are unintended consequences of what we do. Then you really have to pause and ask: “What is going on here? What are we doing? How was the thought process? What is the direction here?” That can be both a curious and direct exploration. I only have to hold the intention to illuminate perspectives. I don't have to do it explicitly, it can be done implicitly. No need to ask directly, “Have you thought about this and that”? Rather with curiosity try to give birth to self-insights, like, what about these perspectives that we discussed, and so on. What may sometimes take time is the process of internalisation. The process of translating those perspectives into internalised seeing and action. Often dialogues need to be held several times or with several persons to accommodate that process.

It is very interesting to hear you hold such a complex view of the system dynamics. And that you highlight sensing as key. If you sense something is weird, if something calls for your attention - then you start the reflective dialogue to explore together. The language being super-important. Anything else?

The language, yes. Also presence, availability, has been very important. One thing I have done that I think is key is to minimise and act quickly with all administration. If there is a purchase order, I try to do it within a minute, or preferably within half-a-minute. All of those things should go very quickly. Taking as little time and attention as possible. It has been a way of protection for me too. No one should be able to claim that such a large group is impossible. That I am not available, or that the administration consumes all time. Instead I take the role of cultivating the flow. Keeping the flow is so important. If someone is in a creative flow and needs to buy a tool or something else to keep going, then I can't delay it for a week because... , well, God knows what. Speed is part of the redeeming factor. A real enabler. Both for me, and my organisation.

But there is also another part in this, that I have to show that I have no lumps in the protocol. It should not be possible to point on this and say, your group is too large, it is not possible. So I have to have these clear, simple, routines.

Minimising administration to maximise enabling of flow. So there will only be green ticks in the reporting forms?

There will only be green ticks! I am breaking the pattern and people think “So damn strange, but there are only green ticks. Your department are modelling excellence. Go ahead!”. I just play the part. That battle is not worth having.

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To have only green ticks. We also see how other post-conventional leaders describe the same situation. As long as the organisation get all checks in their achiever books I'm quite free. Because then they can't say, "You're not doing your job." Because, look here, I sure am...

Yes, something like that. I need to re-package and it usually works. But then it is also important to make things visible, it needs to be visible what we do. To be seen. What we do is, after all, an extremely odd activity from the company's perspective.

Almost always what happens when you start up a team to work with corporate innovation, is that they usually become the most hated part of the organisation. Because they are seen as being greater than others, that they are sitting on a golden calf or in an ivory tower. They might also be threatening me, my work, and say that I'm stupid for doing things the old way... But there is nothing like that. When I speak to others in the organisation, they don't dislike us.

There are a number of things around this that are important, such as Anna, my colleague. She is very good at inclusion and cooperation all around the organisation and has been a very good partner to have, interacting with everyone around us.

Organisation wide interaction and dialogue seem to be an enabler for your work. What draws my curiosity is that you seem to have abandoned goals and guiding via different targets. Let go of the traditional measuring of progress. Is that something that is enabled thanks to your innovation mission? Is it easier for you to scrap goals, while this might not be as easy in the rest of the organisation?

It should be said that innovation operations are usually very KPI steered. And I have felt clearly that we don't want to go that way. I described the setup to a graduate once and he laughed at me. "It will never work! You do understand that it won't work, right? After all, you have to steer and manage by KPIs." ... Well, yes, maybe, or maybe not...

The company in general is starting to revert back to goal steering, stronger hierarchy and top down follow up of objectives and key results. This is done at a point in time where it risks creating the most damage. Total insensitivity to where the organisation is at. Lack of sensing into the present state. This blueprint has huge shadow sides.

There is no contact with the organisation. Already previously the organisation had strong incentives to lie upwards, hide and obscure. Protect own ground. And when the situation becomes apparent, the medicine is to measure and control even more. Which in turn strengthens the incentives to lie.

And there is already strong organisational fear, where the main fear is probably what can be described as our "competence shift". We have a shift in skills that is absolutely necessary, but this shift is sometimes used to soften dissent. So if you give feedback from below, then you can be a problem. Quite like: "you don't understand this new way, You belong to the old competence". Although you might understand perfectly but just want to add other perspectives. Such situations exist in the organisation and there the "goal setting" monster risk making things worse

Do you think your way of leading and working would be possible to apply outside of your Organisational Innovation department?

I am incredibly curious to understand how the way we lead OIA would work in other places.

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On what scale is it possible to work like this? What would happen? I don't know, This is probably what I theoretically delve into the most. That's what I read about, these magical insights that exist around complex systems.

And I guess this is where I am right now. One of my sub-teams wondered why don't I set goals for them? And the question came up: what do I really think is important? It must be something? Thinking about it, one part is to enable participation, that there is an opportunity to participate, opportunity for agency. The second is that you as an individual are sufficiently educated. That's where I end up, that people need development, education and are given a fair chance to participate. Education and cultivation. That is central. I landed there, again!

Education and cultivation as central, not only competence but also cultivation. To cultivate the ability to take and hold different perspectives?

Yes! , Definitely. If I would describe the biggest priority we have from OIA, well, we don't work with priorities, but if I had to choose one it would be investing in development programs for people. It is by far the most important asset. What I feel in meetings with individuals, what we together let emerge in conversations, grows trust. Trust that something will happen, and that a person has an evolved discernment, to actually reflect and learn from what they do. So evolving perspective taking and discernment is a real key.

So, in your experience evolved perspective taking capabilities and discernment, you don't need to articulate goals and have goal management. Dialogue and reflection make it heading in the right direction anyway?

Yes, there is collective discernment, sensing and judgement.

- So, collective discernment, sensing and judgement arise in the dialogues that take place. And you don't even have to measure it. And in this way of being and doing things, very favourable conditions to spark and release creativity arises? Isn't it so?

Exactly. If you look in certain fields where this is backwards, such as in "new public management" where you take away people's own judgement and exchange it for metrics. Creativity and own judgement and discernment drops. As in public procurement which is basically good, with very healthy intentions helping get rid of problems with bribery and such. But it also removes discernment and personal and collective judgement. And we risk ending up in a state of passivity and non-judgement, in the fear of making the wrong decisions and investments..

Like, if I can't prove that I did the right thing, then I stand with the shame of having done something wrong, something that only I can bear? Is there a problem with this?

Yes, let me explain what I see. If you live under the moral obligation to do the best thing with the company's money all the time, that may lead to passivity. Doing wrong, you've wasted the company's money, which we could have used for all these other better things. The fact that we have limited resources means we have to spend these in the best way. Therefore, we must know what the future looks like and target-manage based on this knowledge. And in doing so, help people prioritise, and then largely deprive them of their collective judgement. That is a huge shadow side! And the experience of this has taught me to be able to turn it around. Emphasise that it is our moral obligation to dare to investigate, to be curious, to explore and to arrive together at what this is. And it seems to work. I have learned to spot that moral view and begin to know how to respond to it

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So, if you were to describe why OIA exist, you land pretty close there?

Yes, something like that, and also why am I in this myself? I end up feeling that this is something I can contribute to and it is important in the larger organisation. Show how to create participation, to enable agency, and to develop a strong personal and collective judgement, discernment. Incredibly liberating. And here we can see thriving working like that.

Powerful, to let the power that exists blossom from where it is, and not say that now we should blossom in this direction...

We are still curious about your language. What is it that you want to convey or enable with the way you use the language?

Well, I probably want to use language in such a way where I avoid concepts and words and formulations that are closing, but rather help to open up. To constantly increase the variety, variations, the possible outcomes, as a central mechanism in the whole.

So you may wonder, should we never aim to focus? To narrow down? To close? But I try to work with the dialogue so that, where we create, we have increased variety. In addition, we can always clarify and give examples. We can illuminate an example, a funny story, a technology, a phenomenon, which becomes a facet of this phenomenon, which becomes a focal point, more easy to absorb. It is leading by directing the attention of a group. That means you don't have to get into this thinking that everything has to converge. You can have a continued divergence, with timely clarifications, focal points

So we don't need to converge anything to one point, at least not everything? Now we need to re-shape the diamond model, in which we move through a sequence of divergence, allowing for time to elapse to then converge. Where one question has one answer. But instead you mean we can let things continue to diverge?

Yes, that model itches like hell. Because what you do there is you think in sequence. And also you think about different parts in that sequence. And on top of that, you end up burning down the library in Alexandria, when you're done. To forget everything else but your solution...

Can we instead try to keep metacognition over time as a central aspect, and at the same time dare to make parts of it into action. Then we get two polarities to play with. Which will dance. The one does not exclude the other. You should be able to be curious about the efficiency of wind turbines, and still build a drone. And decide that now, now we're going to do this...

It sounds like you are describing constant dynamics and movement. And you don't shut down the movement. It continues to grow, but do you pick out facets that can become concrete?

Yes, and it's a total anxiety reliever. Then you don't have to come up with the optimal final solution. You dare to take steps without getting an inguinal hernia. Another thing we have realised along the way, emerging from the dynamic between me and Anna and the team. We mix some people who are very action oriented together with people who are very reflection oriented. When you put them in the same dough and they start to blend and dance together, then it becomes awesome

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This last part is probably the most difficult to explain, while also being one of the most central parts. I can feel somewhat powerless about this sometimes. I don't know how we can invite more people to look here, see what landscape is emerging. Where you don't have to be a heroic boss who helps people prioritise.

Maybe it can't be explained? Either you see it and you're there. Or you don't because you are not there. Because it is not a part of your constructs, yet. It may not be possible to explain if you do not experience or can feel it. Just as it was not possible to explain to the Catholic Church in the 16th century that the earth is round. It doesn't work, doesn't exist in the world view.

Or when Ingmar Stenmark tries to explain to a sports journalist how he did it. "Just go." and "The more you practise, the luckier you are..."

Exactly. But now we need to pause there. I must leave. I say pause, because I don't think we're going to stop here...

I don't either. This will continue to emerge. And next time we speak, new facets have grown in the continuous emergent dance. New facets that we currently cannot predict or forecast.

To be continued, then. We look forward to that. Thank you Henrik.

To be continued. Thank you too!

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Closing Reflections

We are grateful to have had the chance to interview Henrik. His story is a brilliant example of a deliberate work to shape something new meeting the needs of the emerging paradigm of leadership, meeting what will be required by both the market and the employees. To shape the emerging paradigm of leadership.

Henrik is a living proof that the Achiever driven, control and follow up leadership strategy is obsolete. Obsolete, but not yet gone. Obsolete, because it does not untap the full true potential of the collective. Henrik shows that astonishing organisational results AND human wellbeing and growth not only can be combined, but that they are mutually reinforcing when done like this.

Three things stand out to us in this story:

Firstly: the application of emergent practices. To stay in divergence, never to aim for closure. Henrik shares how he has let go of the old paradigm with goal setting, targets, one-on-one meetings to steer and support his employees. Instead he trusts emergence. Where the dialogue and day to day interactions enables “steering” and support on what is really important to move forward. How this leads to individuals and teams doing extraordinary things. Creating extraordinary results. Results that you sometimes would not expect at all.

Secondly: the continuous interweaving of the inner and outer journey. Continuously deepening our learning in human psychology, complex systems, feedback loops, what leadership really is... And continuously cultivating our awareness and understanding in applying and experimenting with what you can call control, steering and direction from a post-heroic mind. Experimenting through our joint sense of direction, our sense of action, collective judgement and discernment. Using emergent approaches to experiment with what leadership and control really is and showing what it could be. To create what he describes as “accelerating capabilities to achieve the most supreme results”.

Thirdly: the insight that education and cultivation of consciousness are complementary keys to get here. Education alone is not enough. Practice and integration of metacognition, sensing, perspective taking and intuition is key to continuously sense, make sense of and respond to what is going on. Together. For this, emergent dialogue is the primary means of both discovery, insight and steering.

With Love
Karin and Niklas

About us:

We, Karin and Niklas, hold a range of global certifications in developmental coaching, vertical leader development, the relational organisation, sustainable change of social systems, vertical organisational development, self-organising structures and so on... But this is not the primary reason why we are really successful in what we do.

Many others use this research to compete. A fit right into our Achiever paradigm. “The more developed the better”, “Later is greater”, “We need to develop”, “We must...” And so on. The problem with this approach is that it actually seems to inhibit the very growth and development aimed for. Striving for consciousness expansion is a great hinder for the same. We learn to say the right things, but on the inside, nothing really changes. It is hurtful. And we have seen it closely.

We have found another way. A holistic way. Free from competition. Free from better or worse. We use this research to meet ourselves. To meet every part of ourselves with an open heart. With compassion. With love. And when we do, we start to integrate ourselves. Our consciousness opens up for expansion. We heal. And we grow from the inside out. In a dialogue we had with Bill Torbert on this he said something like: “Trying to expand your post heroic figures without having properly integrated our heroic stages is like trying to climb a staircase nailed to the floor. It hurts. And it is impossible.”

So, in all our work, we work holistically. And people attending our programs and workshops are actually moved. Touched by meeting themselves, through others. For we are all beautiful. And deep inside, we know it.

Get in touch:

We want to share what we, by experience and validation, know have transformative effect within the field of personal and leader development for the emerging future.

Get in touch if you sense that our paths may cross, or if you are curious of what we can do together.