



Navigating sustainable healthcare transformations: Directionality, deep systemic change and docking

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Navigating sustainable healthcare transformations: Directionality, deep systemic change and docking

Several societal systems are undergoing change in terms of how we approach them; shifting away from top-down control, they are increasingly understood and governed from the bottom up. This is particularly true for systems that are complex in nature and undergo transformation. In this project, the healthcare system's transition toward closer, more equitable, accessible and patient-centred care has been studied in collaboration with healthcare practitioners and organisations.

When transforming complex systems—where an existing setup is largely to be replaced by something new—simply improving the existing system is insufficient. It is essential to establish a direction for the transformation and gain a deep understanding of the system undergoing change. This can reveal leverage points where smaller interventions have the potential for significant impact in the desired direction. These serve as starting points for “expeditions” to explore viable pathways for the new system. Equally important is preparing the existing system to assimilate insights from these expeditions, creating “docking stations” where new learning can influence existing structures, cultures and ways of working.

This project has examined directionality, deep systemic change and docking in collaboration with the healthcare system in Western Sweden. Directionality is important for articulating and guiding change towards desired futures and evaluating the depth of transformation required. Exploratory initiatives are common, but the docking of insights is often lacking and should be considered throughout the process, not only at the end. The project's most significant contribution has been the collaborative development of tools and methods with the healthcare organisation, enabling a deeper understanding of the system. The iceberg model commonly used in systems thinking has been extended by introducing the underlying concept of tension of desire. The iceberg helps structure a diagnosis of a present situation, system, issue or problem, explaining the causes giving rise to certain system behaviours or events. The project has developed a tension wheel framework to surface and work through both situated and existential tensions in transformation processes.

How the existential tension wheel is performed in a certain culture or organisation creates its basic values and forms the worldview, formulating what is important. At the level of values and worldview in the iceberg model, dominant values and worldviews can create tension in a specific organisation or culture, forming a situational tension wheel. Corresponding tension wheels can also be found at other levels of the iceberg model. What is emphasised in the situational tension wheel changes over time with shifts in perspectives and power. At the top level of the iceberg, tensions become visible as a crack or conflict, often resulting from one side of the wheel being overemphasised (see Figure 1).

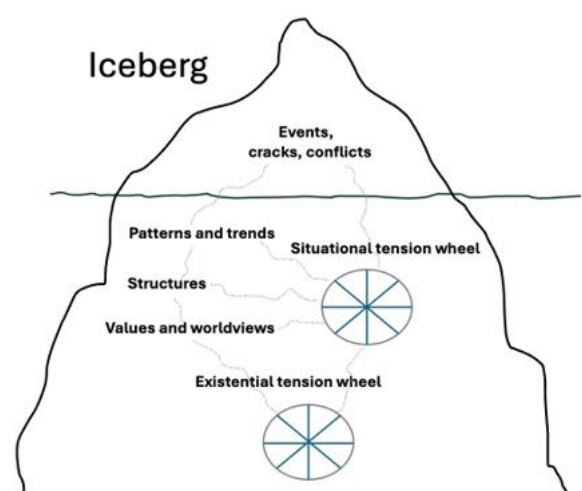


Figure 1. The iceberg and the tension wheels.

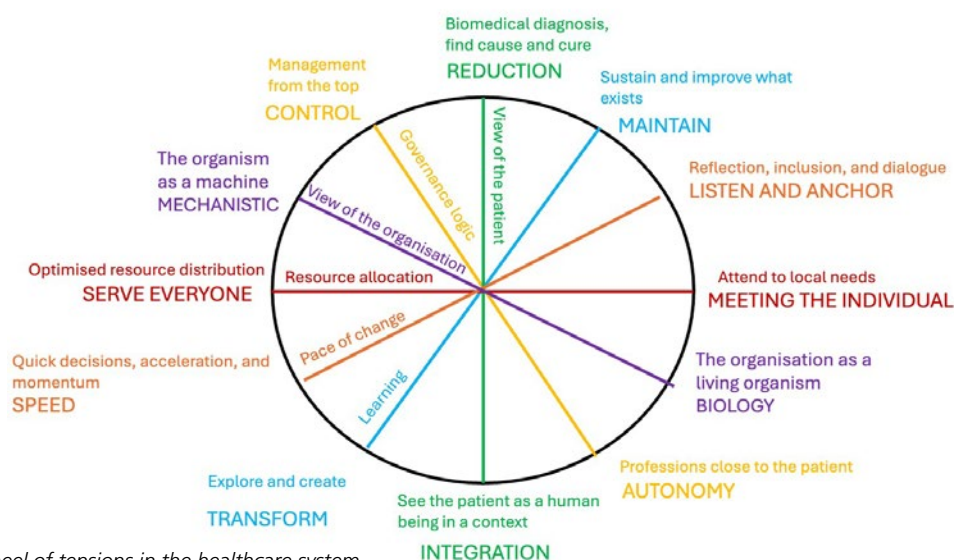


Figure 2. Wheel of tensions in the healthcare system.

When we collaboratively explored the healthcare system using the conceptual iceberg model, we identified various types of tensions through iterative scoping interviews on why transformation was difficult. Tensions existed between different interests and at several levels. A tension visible on the surface could often be traced to an underlying field of tension between desires at a deeper level. These fields provide a complementary and important view of the organisation. The ability to balance management logic and profession logic was considered central by several actors, particularly in ensuring the best possible care for individuals while fairly distributing limited resources across those with care needs. In follow-up workshops with professionals, we supplemented tensions in governance logic (management and professional autonomy) and learning logic (expedition and cruise) with additional tensions, represented as “spokes” in a tension “wheel”. These are summarised in Figure 2, where the spokes represent themes of tension and their endpoints indicate key desires. Here, desires are situated at the level of worldview and values in the iceberg.

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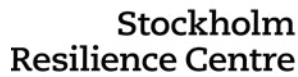
WHAT'S THE ROAD AHEAD FOR POLICY?

- Policy should recognise and encourage docking as part of process design and ensure that it is planned for in exploratory endeavours.
- Policy should encourage making directionality explicit in transformation initiatives while leaving room for actors to negotiate direction according to their needs and context.
- Policy should acknowledge tensions inherent in the policy process when seeking to guide, induce or accelerate sustainability transformations, which are inherently open-ended processes of change.
- Policy actors would benefit from articulating tensions related to their activities and objectives, possibly with support from the tension wheel framework.

PUBLICATION

Bornemark, J., Holmberg, J., Holmén, J., and Saglietti, C. 2026. Tensions of Desire: An extension of the 'iceberg model' and a case from sustainable healthcare transformation. Submitted for publication.

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