

Ari Sihvola

Mostly Uphill, Smiley



My Working Life 1976-2019

Helsinki 2021

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INTRODUCTION

As my transition from work to retirement inevitably approached, I began to consider making an intellectual testament of my career. I had served the working life 43 years and was about to retire to man's "*troisième âge*" as fully-served at the age of 68. I thought I should tell my children and grandchildren what "our father" and "*muffa*" had done at work all those years. That is, after all, what children ask their parents and grandparents. Likewise, I figured that there were people in public administration, for whom the years which this book covers were just as much an important generation experience as they were for me. I considered it my duty to pass on the institutional memory of my own generation to future generations.

I started writing in the autumn of 2019. I wrote a couple of pages at a time, usually during the quiet hours of the evening and night. Sometimes I did other work I had started to accumulate as a pensioner. Then I went back to my computer. Getting started was tricky every time, but when I caught up on the plot again, I forgot the passage of time. All the years of greatness and fields of glory came back to my mind as living memories. Memories were transferred to paper. They began to take shape in the written form of my working life, the story of Ari's work.

When I finished the draft text in the winter of 2020, I turned to colleagues and friends. I wanted to get their opinion of my story. I express my thanks to Eero Vuohula, Nina Laakso, Juha Rumpunen, Ari Holopainen,

Eveliina Salonen, Eero Koskenniemi and Liisa Peura for their valuable comments. My special thanks go to Sampo Sihvola, who also read the manuscript and commented on it. I finished the Finnish text during the Covid-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020. The English version I completed one year later, when the pandemic was still among us. I am grateful to William Peskett, an author, poet, and editor from Northern Ireland, for his valuable comments on the English text. It goes without saying that I take all the responsibility for the contents of the book.

Finally, I want to say that even though I speak about events related to the Finnish Foreign Ministry, the European Commission and the HAUS Finnish Institute of Public Management, these memoirs are not the history of those organisations, but my history. I was only one of the actors on the stage of the administrative play. The ideas I put forward here are my thoughts, not the opinions of the institutions.

Helsinki, May 2021

Ari Sihvola

1

FAREWELL TO YLIOPISTONKATU

My long career at the HAUS Finnish Institute of Public Management ended on the last of March 2019. The next day I became a pensioner. However, my farewell party took place a month later, on the eve of Labour Day. I had said in the workplace that I did not want the traditional managing director's "talk that talk", nor fundraising by the staff, but everything else was negotiable. However, my wish did not fully come true. Our new managing director Kyösti Väkeväinen (who started in February 2019) delivered a short speech: "Thank you, Ari," and gave me two gift cards, one from the management and the other from the staff.

HAUS communications manager Janina Himberg and I had together planned a slightly different farewell ceremony from the standard one in HAUS. I wanted to leave a legacy of all the 22 years that I had worked for the company, the homeland, good governance, and human growth. I had seen and experienced great success, swallowed the bitter lime of losses, always getting back to my feet. I was, indeed, amazed that I was the first HAUS staff member to retire at the full age of 68.

Together with Janina, I combined my message with suitable melodies of popular music. Most of my colleagues were present at the ceremony. It was overshadowed by the fact that HAUS had just started co-operation negotiations with the staff to revive the company's economy. The previous year had been

tough, the traces of which were visible in people's faces and could be heard in their talk. The farewell ceremony, however, gave people a welcome break from gloomy thoughts.

We stood in a large circle in the beautiful HAUS lobby. Then we started marching around like geese to the rhythm of Peter, Paul & Mary's song "Weave Me the Sunshine". The song encourages you to forget your grief and believe in the sunshine. After one verse we stopped, and I presented my own thoughts on times past.

First, I said that one of the key HAUS tasks was still the development of learning methods. I remembered the early years of my working career, when all we training managers in the Finnish public administration studied cognitive learning theory under Professor Yrjö Engeström's guidance at HAUS. Behaviourist learning technology was, indeed, our bad guy. The initial cell, constructive conflict and orientation basis were our mantras. It is difficult for me to accept the current digital learning method because it emphasises the importance of technology. Nevertheless, I had not wanted to start criticising the ideology of digital learning. I lacked a basic knowledge of the intricacies of the new method. However, I said I hoped that those HAUS people who were now eagerly speaking in favour of digital learning would accept different, critical views of future generations against the mainstream view. Otherwise, today's radicals will be tomorrow's conservatives, putting on the brakes for development.

Then again, we marched in a ring with Peter, Paul & Mary singing "Weave me the Sunshine".

Secondly, I presented my views on the management of HAUS major changes of the past year. Somewhat sarcastically, I said I was glad the responsible leader left and that he left so quickly. I also said that HAUS should never have signed a job contract with him. Such great turmoil, a downright hash, he managed to create in a year. I felt it unfair that the new managing director and the staff had to clean up the mess that he had caused. The past years had taught me that – at the end of the day – the staff must always pay the bill caused by the bosses' bad economic decisions.

Next, I said that during all those years that I had worked in HAUS I had been convinced that the staff had done their job tenaciously and kept the company going in spite of the then management policy and regardless of the financial situation. We had had a strong belief that we had done important work. The experts mastered their business and the teams worked wholeheartedly to keep the customers satisfied. The people, the colleagues, were the best thing in HAUS. We shared with each other the joys and sorrows of everyday life. We helped each other, stood together against the pressure, and resisted together the punches we got. We were happy of the good work that we had done, and the success we had received. Our level of integrity was high.

I then presented my opinion of HAUS new premises. HAUS managed to keep its headquarters in Munkkiniemi at Hollantilaisentie 11, in an old cadet school, for more than 40 years (since 1976). Then the state-owned real estate company Senate, in its greed for money, decided to sell the house. HAUS and the Customs School, operating in the same building, were

forced to leave. HAUS found new premises in the city centre, in the Heimola building, next to the main campus of the University of Helsinki. The move took place in the winter of 2018.

Yliopistonkatu's (*University Street*) new facilities were certainly clean, and the location was brilliant. However, we did not have enough classrooms or meeting rooms. We had to constantly rent premises from elsewhere. The scarcity of training facilities was explained not only by cost savings but also by the proliferation of digital learning. People would no longer need to be physically present, the managers argued; distance connections would suffice for them. Customers could study online independently at their own pace when it suited them. I was not very convinced of that. In my opinion, a large part of learning is based on social interaction, which is difficult to replace by technical solutions. Social interaction is particularly necessary in management and leadership coaching. In the coaching process learning new knowledge or new skills is not as important as dialogue with your colleague. Dialogue is needed to change attitudes. Basically, coaching is about listening and understanding the arguments of both parties to be able to negotiate a solution and a new policy.

In addition, we moved from Munkkiniemi's spacious premises into a multi-purpose office landscape, where no one had a workstation of his own, let alone an office. The premises were simply overcrowded. I was haunted by this. The walls were too close, people spinning around each other's feet all the time. We moved to a culture of silence where knowledge did not flow. My own soul remained in Munkkiniemi, even

though my body moved to the city centre. I think that institutions like HAUS need a proper building, to which the director of the house is happy to invite foreign guests and where each staff member has a space to breathe and at times think about his own business.

Then we stopped the farewell goose march. We settled into a circuit, and I delivered three messages for future generations. I referred to the fact that nobody is irreplaceable. And even though I had worked 22 years in HAUS, my files would be transferred to a new owner. This is how institutions live. Clowns change, the circus remains, I said. Meanwhile, Janina and I played the Kinks song “Death of a Clown” (Let us drink to the death of a clown!) in the background.

I cannot claim that I was the only one to create brilliant HAUS business solutions. However, I had a glimpse of hope, as we all have for sure, that a memory of me would remain in the history of HAUS. I had chosen Gilbert Bécaud’s song “Quand il est mort le Poète” (when the poet is dead) as the next background music. The lyrics are quite simple: when the poet is dead, all his friends cry. In fact, the whole world is crying. His star is buried in a cornfield, and therefore the whole cornfield is full of cornflowers. The idea here is that while the cornflower is a weed, it is also a powerful source of pollen for insects. Cornflower needs the cornfield to spread its pollen more widely. That is what I thought of myself; that I could be like a cornflower, whose ideas spread and live in time forward to the following generations.

Finally, I confessed my love to all my colleagues. Business is not only tough toil for your daily bread, but also a lot of common caring. It is hard to finish a long

relationship, but time goes by and finally it is the moment of departure. To describe this feeling, I recited the verses of the song "Les feuilles mortes" (autumn leaves) written by the French poet Jacques Prévet. The last verse ends with the following words, "But life separates the lovers from each other. And the waves of the sea wash away from the beach sand the footsteps of separated lovers." This is how I felt now about the final adieu.

2

HOW TO VIEW MY CAREER

As my career began to end, I was supported by the idea that it was necessary to write down the things that had been important to me in my own career. I would need a reasoned account of my own thoughts and actions. I feel that it is my duty to deliver a balance sheet of my working life to the following generations. I want to transmit my professional last will to my colleagues and co-workers, who feel that their own work to manage the future business is based on the achievements of their senior colleagues. It is therefore a matter of transferring the institutional memory from the sunset rider to the attention of the young heroes.

Recollection of old business always includes the personal interpretation on how things were. The autobiographer tends to emphasise the good things he did and the results he achieved; the misfortunes he would be happy to forget, even if they gave him lessons to learn. Human memory is in this sense selective. On the other hand, I have tried to be honest with myself. I have not wanted to talk just about victories and success. That is not my style. In the end, in all my subjectivity, I have tried to be objective.

My everyday duties, consisting of human resources development and organisational development, implied working with people. I wanted to mention in the book the merits of my colleagues. I did not want just to tell things in passive form. Nor did I want to describe events by using only people's professional titles.

However, the names of all the colleagues I have met throughout my career do not appear in the text. This does not mean that I would not have appreciated their contribution or importance to my own getting along. I wanted to avoid long lists of names so that the narration would remain solid and understandable. I have included in the text the people with whom I have worked for a long time on many occasions, or who have been important to me in my personal growth.

At no point in my career did I keep a diary in which I would have recorded the day's events and moods. Keeping a journal has its own limitations too, if the writer is thinking about how to convey to future generations the interpretation of himself in his own way. However, I have a lot of notebooks in which I wrote important points of meetings, interviews, and reports for many years. I took especially many notes when I was the director of the international business at the HAUS Finnish Institute of Public Management. So much happened every day that I needed external support for my memory.

Towards the end of my career portable computers began to replace notebooks. Growing older made me convinced that I knew my profession and my main tasks and objectives well. I thought that it was enough to write up only such things that were important. Over the years, however, notes began to wane. I thought of this that I had learnt wisdom to such an extent that I trusted in myself and my own thinking. Besides, I also found that my younger colleagues were better and faster than me in all the detail. I wanted to give them a chance to show their skills and to grow in their work.

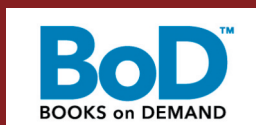


Ari Sihvola (born 1951) began his career at the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs as a young civil servant in the 1970s. Over the years, Ari has played a key role in the development of public governance and the development of the skills of civil servants, especially in EU affairs and leadership. In addition to Finland and the European Commission, Ari's expertise has been utilised in many demanding international projects on four continents. Known for his anecdotes and colourful true stories, Ari looks at governance with an analytically critical yet gentle understanding way.

As a teenager, Ari did not think of going, as an adult, to work for the Foreign Ministry or to become a manager for international development projects. The desire to grow guided his choices. Ari believes that we have a desire to constantly improve ourselves, our skills.

"An impressive tale, nicely written. Sihvola's personality shines through."

- William Peskett



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