

**EdCW 2020****International Scientific and Practical Conference Education in a Changing World: Global Challenges and National Priorities****OPINION OF TOP OFFICIALS ABOUT LEADERSHIP IN PUBLIC ORGANIZATIONS**

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**Abstract**

The public sector has been influenced by different management paradigms. Over time, however, administrative work and the exercise of leadership based on values introduced from other sectors have apparently come to occupy separate cultural spheres. This leads us to question imported leadership models that clash with the management of public organizations, and to ask if these entities need to be understood according to their own views of leadership. This work explores the image that exists in the public sector regarding leadership roles, the main problems faced by upper management and solutions that should be applied in public organizations to reinforce competencies when designing leadership development programs. A qualitative study was done to discover the opinions of high-ranking officials at different administrative levels on diverse aspects of leadership in their organizations. The topics were opened for virtual debate on the Moodle™ learning platform of the National Institute of Public Administration in Spain. The results describe how the civil servants who participated perceive the role of leader in the public sector, the main problems involved in exercising leadership and areas they think should be strengthened in any public employee who aspires to a leadership role. While respecting the differences in administrative systems and the conditions under which the public sector functions in each State, this paper offers new information about the competencies that should be promoted in leadership development programs.

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## 1. Introduction

There is already an extensive research trajectory describing how management focuses affect public organizations seeking to move away from what is considered the real *modus operandi* of public entities, which is based on the bureaucratic paradigm (de Vries, 2016; Henry, 2016). For more than a century, successive and overlapping interpretations of the most adequate way to manage public administrations have sought, aggressively or otherwise, to counteract the initial bureaucratic paradigm. A vast bibliography can be accessed concerning origins, assumptions, aims and transformational tools in the public sector, as well as the consequences of alternative, post-bureaucratic focuses (Barzelay, 2019; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011; Van Der Wal, 2017).

All these focuses, whether they seek to increase production, improve the participation of the actors involved, diversify and intensify deliberation or maximize inter-organizational relations, share the common ground of promoting ideal concepts, structures and ideal processes to achieve greater management efficiency (Bourgon, 2017).

Embedded in the objectives of each management focus is an interest in stimulating its own kind of leadership that is distinctive but coherent with the values pursued (Mendez, 2020). While interest in leadership may not be explicit in the objectives – though there are exceptions – the epistemic communities that sustain the diverse management focuses assume that there will be a role for someone who is responsible for ensuring higher quality, more effective and more efficient functioning of the administrative apparatus. Improving internal cohesion, commitment, drive and innovation capacity are only a very few of the demands imposed on directors or those who exercise leadership (Virtanen & Tammeaid, 2020).

Some of the most prestigious literature on developments in leadership studies (Bass & Bass, 2008), particularly in the public sector (Crosby, & Bryson, 2018; Fernandez et al., 2010; Van Wart, 2003, 2017), describe an enormous increase in leadership studies that nonetheless convey little useful knowledge on the subject. Hypotheses to explain the lack of results (Mendez, 2020) or even interest in designing rigorous studies (Van Wart, 2003, p. 215) include denial that true public leadership exists, due to the overwhelmingly instrumental nature of the directive role in this sector; the insignificance of exercising public leadership that is subjected to forces outside the leader's control; or the distraction of scientific interest in related, more appealing topics (bureaucratic routines, political leadership, normative studies).

In a modest attempt to adopt a traditional vision of the study of public leadership, and thereby acknowledge its existence, this work offers new information about the environment in which an administrative leader operates. For the purposes of this study, we will identify such a person as one who exercises a top position linked to a professional career and who is directly – not politically – responsible for administrative areas that manage human, material and economic resources in the public sector.

## 2. Problem Statement

Most of the abundant literature on the development of director capacities concerns leadership and performance in the private sector. Much less attention has been given to other spheres.

The public sector continues to suffer from the lack of research on administrative leadership. However, the deficit has not prevented guidelines being formulated over the decades to prescribe areas of competence for those who direct public organizations. This can lead to serious issues that jeopardize the validity of many leadership training programs in the public sector.

We consider knowledge of the contextual factors that affect what public leaders can and cannot do to be essential for conceptualizing future training programs. It is impossible to think about designing appropriate and useful director development initiatives without an understanding of the environment in which public leaders must function.

### **3. Research Questions**

In the frame of studies on leadership in public organizations, this work sought to answer the following questions:

- What motivates or demotivates individuals in leadership positions in the public sector?  
What principles guide the leadership culture?
- What are the main problems facing public organizations that should be addressed from leadership positions?
- What solutions might be applied to these challenges?
- What are the main competencies that those who lead public organizations should acquire?

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The guiding purpose of this research was to obtain information from the perspective of administrative leaders on contextual aspects (main problems, guiding values, challenges) that affect directors in the public sector. The aim was to uncover developmental areas that can inform the design of future leadership training programs for the public sector.

### **5. Research Methods**

This qualitative study was based on focus groups in the Spanish central administration sphere. Nine debate forums were held – three per year, three years – in March of 2016, 2017, and 2019. The debates lasted seven days. Around 23 directors participated each year, for a total of 68 (38 women and 30 men). The participants were high-ranking civil servants working in diverse ministries and public sector entities of Spanish public administration.

The focus groups were organized according to the most widely accepted administrative criteria (Robinson, 2020). Participants attended online using the Moodle™ learning platform of the Spanish National Institute of Public Administration. The groups were guided by a moderator with ample experience in leadership development and group facilitation. The participants responded individually in

writing to several questions and sent them to the monitor, who made all responses available to all participants, so that any point of view expressed by the participants could be discussed. The focus groups generated a total of 130 interventions.

The main measurements corresponded to factors that motivate or demotivate directors in their work; the principles and values that guide their leadership culture; the main challenges their entities face; the solutions their entities should apply; and the range of capacities required for the director's role.

The focus groups were analyzed in three phases (during the forums, analysis of each individual interview or group session after the forums, overall), by selecting relevant fragments for study and looking for similarities, contrasts and informant categorization.

## **6. Findings**

The main findings are summarized below, organized according to the topics addressed.

### **6.1. Motivating and demotivating factors**

Many linked their motivation as directors with appreciation for the work content, competent co-workers, the possibility of continuous learning and especially the sense that their work is meaningful and useful. Another factor that appeared in several responses linked motivation with the perception of equity in the organization: the sense that one's efforts are proportionally rewarded compared to those of others. In this case, compensation went beyond retribution or other non-monetary elements to include the clear sense that one's effort is valued by the citizenry.

The factors that the participants considered to increase motivation, in order of greater to lesser relevance, were as follows:

- doing stimulating work with responsibilities
- doing work that has a social impact
- having the means to continue learning
- autonomy (margin for decision-making and organizing work) and sense of control over one's own work
- taking on new challenges
- collaborating with people within the entity and from other organizations
- understanding the organization as a whole
- giving and receiving support
- doing productive, successful work
- feeling part of a team
- recognition for a job well done

The participants also recognized their responsibility for generating opportunities to apply and promote these stimulus factors among co-workers.

On the other side of the issue, the primary circumstances considered most demotivating included lack of orientation and coordination among units and individuals, lack of planning, communication problems, the weight of routine in procedures and difficulties in promoting changes in the organization.

## **6.2. Cultural values**

Values that should guide the actions of a leader were extracted from the debate on advice the participants would give to new colleagues. We synthesized shared principles concerning leadership in their organizations into four dimensions (learning, attitude towards work, interpersonal relations, organization of work):

### *Learning*

- Value the knowledge of those who have most experience.
- Understand the environment well before acting and avoid making speculations.
- Observe in order to innovate.
- Stay up-to-date on research and new technology.
- Never stop learning.
- Acquire leadership capabilities.

### *Attitude towards work*

- Practice patience, prudence and perseverance.
- Keep a vision of the organization as a whole and how it fits in the socio-economic context.
- Have confidence and be willing to dialogue with others.
- Be proactive, creative, able to take initiatives, not fearful of change.
- Be coherent.
- Keep an open mind to adapt to constantly changing circumstances.

### *Interpersonal relations*

- Transmit to co-workers the importance of the work being done.
- Acknowledge the importance of the end user or those who benefit from your work.
- Care for personnel and supervise the status of interpersonal relations.
- Generate synergies for teamwork.
- Create quality communication and participation.
- Put yourself in the other's place.

### *Organization of work*

- Have quality information.
- Prevent daily work issues from causing stagnation.
- Manage through networks in a coordinated and cooperative way.
- Have an integrated vision of the different processes and the units and individuals involved in them.
- Be prepared to act in unexpected circumstances.
- Take formal and informal aspects into account when making decisions.

### **6.3. Main issues affecting the public sector**

The main issues and challenges faced by the participants' entities concerned the mismatch between organizational structures and social change: in other words, the lack of alignment among objectives, how they are to be achieved and changes in user expectations and problems. There was a widespread perception that the disparity between the organizations they lead, and the evolution of social changes presents a major threat that jeopardizes the real efficacy of their activities.

Participant impressions about the bureaucratic nature of the organizations conveyed the idea of working in a slow, rigid, very self-protecting system, built in part on a widely shared sense of mistrust towards the users of the activities and the environment in which one operates. In their opinion, incentives for personal commitment fade against the sense that their efforts at change will do little to improve the structural problems.

In line with these declarations on demotivating factors, and in contrast with the values that should counteract them, the leaders indicated serious problems of coordination between organizations and administrative levels, along with deficiencies in the focus of human resource policies.

Finally, training deficiencies can be highlighted in two areas, based on the responses: 1) adaptation to new technologies and 2) renewal of public values and reinforcement of public ethics.

### **6.4. Solutions to challenges in the public sector**

When asked about the solutions they thought should be implemented to solve these problems, the directors described a wide range of actions that could be incorporated into transversal management policies or implemented by operative units to improve how their organizations function. The following stand out as the main suggestions, divided into macro-measures of a more structural nature and micro-solutions at the unit level, which depend on each director's margin of action.

#### *Macro-solutions (transversal throughout the organization)*

- Intensify digitalization and diversify areas in which new technologies can be applied.
- Reinforce decentralization, flexibility and coordination.
- Modernize human resources recruiting systems.

- Create more horizontal structures.
- Foster reinforcement of personnel capacities.
- Create more open and transparent organizations.
- Make citizens central to actions: get them to feel they are participants and that their opinions are taken into account.
- Separate political initiative (which should exist) from administrative activity (which should be independent and provide security for citizens).
- Improve organizational interoperability.
- Create a culture in which merits and errors are clearly assumed.

*Micro-solutions (adaptable to each unit)*

- Anticipate user needs.
- Revise and simplify procedures to be more agile and efficient.
- Work with measurable management goals and indicators.
- Improve quality.
- Bring energy and motivation to work activities.
- Improve planning.
- Act to earn social recognition.
- Correctly determine the necessary resources.
- Strengthen ethical conduct.

## **6.5. Competencies to empower the preparation of leaders for the public sector**

The participants insisted on the need to think about public organizations and administrative actions in ways that are coherent with contemporary social development. They emphasized the need for training to increase capacities for studying contextual changes before developing political-administrative actions. In fact, they give insight in line with some guidelines proposed by the literature (Larat, 2016) and transnational organizations (OECD, 2017, 2018).

The participants made interesting observations about the actors who carry the responsibility and privilege of intervening in the design of public policies. They highlighted the need to strengthen ethical principles and improve the perceived value of the work of top management in the public sector.

The participants spoke of the need to develop capacities that will enable a public leader to defend transparency, strengthen the institution and act with restraint, moderation and equity.

The participants argued that the leader should be able to distinguish between political and administrative arenas. While admitting that political influence can interfere with the exercise of leadership by altering work rhythms and distorting the purposes that should guide an organization, they considered politics to be inseparable from administrative reality and defended the need to equip leadership to understand the limits of the influence of each role.

Similarly, the participants acknowledged ICTs as true drivers of intra-organizational and environmental change. They considered that technological advances should be a compulsory element of leadership development.

Finally, the participants assumed that a public leader should be expected to know how to manage critical or uncertain situations. Accordingly, they emphasized the need to equip leaders to improve decision-making abilities and manage situations of conflict and risk.

## **7. Conclusion**

In this work, we have described the main findings of a qualitative study on administrative leaders in the public sector. The sphere of study was the Spanish central administration and our informants were high-ranking civil servants directing government organs and public sector entities.

The findings indicate that the main motivating factors for administrative leaders were related to the perception that their work is demanding and challenging, with high levels of responsibility and high social impact. The learning that they acquire in their post and their margin for action are also stimulating factors.

The ethical values that drive their work as directors were primarily related to an appreciation of the importance of continuous learning, the determination to adopt the appropriate attitude towards work, an awareness of the social value of their work and maintaining productive relationships with co-workers.

The main problems they encounter were derived from the bureaucratic nature of the organizations they serve – elements traditionally described in the literature as pathologies of bureaucratic organizations – and a perceived misalignment between organizational capacity and social demand.

To overcome the obstacles they encounter in their work, the participants suggested structural measures – mainly aimed at simplifying procedures, improving coordination mechanisms, expanding digitalization and acting according to transparency criteria – and singular measures within the leader's sphere of action, which include simplifying management and reinforcing commitment and ethical values.

From the opinions gathered, explicitly or implicitly, we have identified some areas that could be reinforced to better equip those who serve as directors or exercise leadership.

The information extracted from this study increases understanding of the contextual factors that affect the action of public leaders. It has theoretical potential for research that seeks to discover meaningful patterns in the actions of public leaders. Similarly, it also has practical potential for designing new empirical research on administrative leadership or complementing work to detect training needs, as a starting point for developing actions to equip leadership.

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