

Ten ideas for new research

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This paper provides an overview of 10 pressing but under-researched aspects of public leadership. They are intended to be thought-provoking – even controversial – for practitioners and researchers alike, and to stimulate research which addresses key theoretical and practical questions.

1. Distinguish public leadership from public services leadership

Researchers should broaden and reconsider their concept of ‘public leadership’, distinguishing it from the ‘public services leadership’ of formal public-office holders and state actors in general¹. This framing would help to clarify whether the focus is on formal office holders or on any leaders who aim or claim to shape the public sphere, including civil society and private sector leaders.

2. Take account of complexity

Context has been neglected in leadership studies. Yet volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA) are often defining features of the environment in which leaders operate. In such white-water conditions, the purposes and processes of leadership are not always shared or understood. Further research should

explore how leaders navigate these challenging environments².

3. Understand how clarity of purpose is achieved

Purpose is often taken for granted or assumed, but defining and articulating purpose can be one of the most difficult and fundamental aspects of leadership. After all, purpose is not given, it is socially constructed³. Given the complexities, there is value in researchers trying to understand how leaders discern where public value lies and how they build consensus so that action can be taken.

4. Understand the conflict and contest at the heart of public leadership

Conflict and contest are ever-present in leadership. Public leaders have to grapple with multiple goals, an array of stakeholders and contradictions within and between policies⁴. Conflicts are bound to emerge and some forms of governance reinforce rather than reduce conflict. How leaders try to channel conflict into respectful contest and exploration rather than denial of difference deserves research.

5. Look at the skills of political astuteness

Leaders need political skills to handle both ‘big P’ and ‘small p’ politics, something

¹ Hartley J (2018) Ten propositions about public leadership. *International Journal of Public Leadership*, 14 (4), 202-217.

²Uhl-Bien M, Marion R and McKelvey B (2007) Complexity leadership theory: Shifting leadership from the industrial age to the knowledge era. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 18(4), 298-318

³ Kempster S, Jackson B and Conroy M (2011). Leadership as purpose: Exploring the

role of purpose in leadership practice. *Leadership*, 7(3), 317-334.

⁴ Benington, J. and Hartley, J. (2019) “Action research to develop the theory and practice of public value as a contested democratic practice” In: Adam Lindgreen et al (eds.). *Public value: deepening, enriching, and broadening the theory and practice*, Routledge: London.

which theory has neglected until recently⁵. Faced with multiple interests, goals, aspirations, and values, public leaders must foster a sufficient degree of consensus to achieve goals. Astute leadership requires personal and interpersonal skills, reading people and contexts, building alignments and alliances, and strategic direction and scanning. Further research on the deployment of political skills, how such skills are acquired and enhanced, and in what contexts, would be valuable.

6. Investigate the dynamics of dual leadership

Thinking of leadership as a distributed activity is fashionable. Yet dual leadership – government minister/permanent secretary, university vice-chancellor/registrar – is largely ignored. Like dancing on ice, dual leadership involves moving together, giving each other space, occasionally stumbling⁶. Studying this prevalent form of public leadership could yield valuable insights on the rich spectrum between individual and completely shared leadership.

7. Explore the relational dynamics of leadership

Leadership is fundamentally about relationships. We ignore the analysis of feelings, emotions, and projections at our peril. The psychological dynamics of leadership, including how people feel about power, dependencies, identity and authority, all matter⁷. One under-researched issue is that leadership can often involve

⁵ Hartley J (2020) Leadership with political astuteness for public servants – and why it matters. In Sullivan H, Dickinson H and Henderson H (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of the Public Servant*.

Hartley J, Alford J, Hughes O and Yates S. (2015) Public value and political astuteness in the work of public managers: The art of the possible. *Public Administration*, 93(1), 195-211

projections from others, which can influence public, media, and even expert assessment of leaders' success. This is especially important for public leaders, as citizens and clients tend to project anxieties and concerns onto public services more than tends to happen for the private sector.

8. Figure out how to foster personal resilience in public leaders

Resilience is linked to wellbeing and the ability to cope with stress. It is particularly relevant for public services providers who must cope with increased demand, higher expectations and public hostility, often amid declining resources. Preventative and restorative resilience can help individuals and groups cope with stress, acute or chronic. Both personality and learned skills matter. The presence or absence of social support systems, training and personal development programmes, and organisational systems, all affect resilience⁸. Research into media blame games could help leaders navigate the 'right' amount of blame to accept when in the public eye.

9. Distinguish leadership, authority and legitimacy

Leadership and authority are often conflated, but disentangling leadership processes from the formal authority derived from positional power or institutions is

⁶ Manzie S and Hartley J (2013) *Dancing on Ice: Leadership with political astuteness by senior public servants in the UK*. Milton Keynes: Open University.

⁷ Heifetz R. (1994). *Leadership Without Easy Answers*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

⁸ Ledesma J (2014) Conceptual frameworks and research models on resilience in leadership. *SAGE Open* July-September, 1–8.

important⁹. Formal authority is not always sufficient. Leadership can extend beyond formal organisational boundaries. Research on the underlying basis of authority and legitimacy – especially in a context where trust in politicians, public servants, and ‘experts’ is waning – is critical.

gained the Lifetime Achievement Award from the International Research Society of Public Management.

10. Design research and methods to reflect complexity and dynamism

Public leadership is complex and contested. These 10 ideas recognise the importance of tacit knowledge, and the careful reading by leaders of context, people, and situations. Context can be fast-changing; sensitive antennae are needed to interpret it. So research insights gleaned from post-hoc interviews, questionnaires or documentary analysis are thus necessarily limited. Researchers should additionally try to be close to (or in) the action over extended periods of time, and undertake longitudinal and comparative case studies.

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⁹ Heifetz R (2011) Leadership and authority. *Public Money and Management*, 31(5), 305-308.