
Public Service Leadership Rapid Literature Reviews

The National Leadership Centre (NLC) supports the country's most senior public service leaders to develop the skills, knowledge, and networks they need to address the challenges the country faces. To do so, the NLC delivers a flagship leadership development programme, supports a network of leaders to connect, and conducts research to build the evidence base regarding public service leadership.

The NLC has commissioned three literature reviews with the aim to build the evidence base regarding *Organisational Effectiveness and Collaboration*, *Systems Leadership*, and *Effective Leadership Qualities*, to inform future NLC activities. Findings have been disseminated within the NLC, and are being reflected in the development of future NLC activity.

Key Findings:

- The reviews suggest that cross-system collaboration is complex, and requires a combination of pre-existing contexts, networks, relationships, and individuals in order to be successful
- The literature recommends shifting the focus of effective leadership away from the qualities of the leader, and towards these relationships, networks, and systems, and environmental conditions, and how they facilitate leadership
- The literature suggests that through facilitative leadership, organisations can become ambidextrous learning organisations; balancing efficiency and exploration. This in turn produces effective collaboration.

Organisational Effectiveness and Collaboration Across the System

This review explored the behaviours and characteristics of large public sector organisations that collaborate across the system. A number of pre-existing and contextual factors were found to affect an organisation's ability to collaborate effectively:

- The design of the institution: whether the organisation is designed to be open to public engagement,
- Tradition of professionalism: how resistant organisations are to share decision making with 'non-experts',
- Centralisation: how internal, and centrally-based, decision-making structures are,
- Legal mandate: whether organisations are legally compelled to act in a way that (de)centralises decision making,
- Interdependence: whether an organisation's mandate could be delivered with more ease when collaborating with other agencies, and whether they are aware of this.

The review reported a number of factors which were found to facilitate collaboration:

- a **willingness** to collaborate,
- the **belief** that collaboration would be beneficial,

- a goal of **collective problem solving**, as opposed to exploitation for personal gain, displaying **collective responsibility** for the shared problem.

In order to overcome necessary thresholds, the review suggests organisations must become **ambidextrous learning organisations** by facilitating learning: balancing a focus on efficiency and incremental improvement with experimental approaches which generate innovation and revolutionary change. This is suggested to be achieved through **facilitative leadership**, which requires leaders to create a shared vision, sense of ownership, and empowerment.

This literature review discusses three overarching principles in depth:

- Collaborative governance: how public agencies collaborate with other organisations, moving away from hierarchical models of decision-making,
- Organisational learning: the capacity of organisations to improve performance based on experience, discussing learning styles and innovation,
- Organisational ambidexterity: how exploration for experimentation and exploitation for refinement can be balanced.

Effective Leadership Qualities

The literature on effective leadership was found to be broad and divergent. This review suggests that the previously proposed 'qualities approach' to effective leadership is reductive and individualistic. Although the literature does discuss the five qualities of effective leadership - ethical, adaptive, connected, purposeful, and questioning - there was seen to be large variation in the degree of support, and variation in understanding.

Instead, a focus on the qualities of the structure, network, and relationships within organisations was seen to aid understanding of effective leadership. Three main clusters of leadership theories which contrast the qualities approach are detailed in the review:

1. Empowering over inspiring - rejecting heroic leadership approaches. This focuses on how the leader interacts with those around them, creating an increasingly horizontal structure.
2. Adaptive organisations over adaptive leaders - rejecting the individual as focus - instead discussing relationships, networks, and systems. Here, the focus is on how leadership emerges through structures and relationships, rather than the qualities of leaders.
3. Specific over abstract - rejecting generalised theories of leadership, instead looking at how leaders approach specific barriers.

The report considers the contrasting ways in which effective leadership can be assessed. A range of tangible and intangible outcomes were found to be used: one organisation may view staff retention rates as a metric of effective leadership, whereas others may view trust as more appropriate.

The review concludes that the NLC should further explore how effective leadership is perceived by leaders themselves, and how this varies by sector, to bring further valuable insight to the field.

Systems Leadership

This review explored the behaviours, traits, and models of systems leadership; the notion that organisations are interconnected, and the decisions one makes affect others. The review discusses how systems leadership may not be achieved through traits exhibited by the leader alone, but instead a shift towards group-based organisational change.

The conditions that are considered necessary for systems change are discussed. On an individual level, systems leaders were seen to need to display three core capabilities:

1. The ability to see the larger system of which they are a part
2. Fostering more reflection and generative conversations
3. Shifting the collective focus from reactive problem-solving to co-creating the future

The literature further details conditions required when a systems approach is used which foster success:

- “Knowing your system”: systems change requires an understanding of the environment, both in terms of the problem at hand, and the way in which stakeholders interact to recognise routes for cooperation,
- “Knowing what will have an impact”: avoiding overly simplistic ideas of systems change and accepting ambiguity. This involves conceptualising what you want to change, who are the relevant actors, and what actions need to be taken next,
- “How to evaluate impact”: understanding how complex systems change brings with it complex methodological issues for evaluation. The review presents iterative approaches to evaluation, taking into account practicalities of implementing programs in the field, such as lower than intended take-up rates.

State of existing research and recommendations

- Much of the literature was found to be specific, reflecting the nature of systems change being unique between organisations and sectors, signalling the need for evaluation of individual needs when undertaking systems change