



What is effective public sector leadership and what's needed next?

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Disclaimer

This paper is not an exhaustive academic exploration, rather intended as a brief high-level overview to assist with applied understanding and sensemaking. Chat GPT and other AI platforms were not used in the development of this paper.

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Executive Summary

What effective public sector leadership entails remains a perennial question. There is a wealth of literature, practitioner perspectives, and marketing about what it is and how can it be achieved. Navigating and selecting from among these perspectives also requires disentangling the incentives behind why certain approaches may be championed. This presents a challenge for public sector learning and development (L&D) professionals trying to make informed decisions about the most suitable and valuable approaches for staff and organisational development.

To help practitioners navigate this space, this paper provides a high-level synthesis of academic literature on relevant and effective leadership approaches for the public sector. It begins by detailing various changes and shifts (Part 1), complexities of deciphering what is 'most effective' and current consensus (Part 2), and what's missing and overlooked (Part 3) before offering suggestions for practice.

Changes & Shifts In Public Sector Leadership

Recent changes in the public sector that we are now operating in appear to be reflected in public sector leadership literature to a certain extent. On balance, there appears to be a change (or evolution) to a collaborative governance paradigm that requires a change (or evolution) in leadership approaches. There has been a shift from transformational to more collective leadership approaches with calls for broader conceptualisations of public leadership to better reflect network and collaborative forms of governance, with an emphasis on collaborative and partnership processes leading to shared outcomes among agencies and sectors, and greater democratic accountability to ensure responsiveness and inclusiveness.

What Do We Mean By 'Effective' Leadership?

'Effectiveness' is a contested concept that is difficult to define, interpret, assess and compare. There is a need to move beyond outdated, re-packaged 'zombie leadership' approaches and instead adopt perspectives that broaden our understanding of leadership beyond individual leaders. This includes viewing leadership as a collective process to which everyone can contribute, recognising that success depends on the quality of connections between leaders and their groups, and championing leadership development that prioritises these principles. It is important to note that both leadership theories and approaches to developing leadership are shifting and changing all the time - often with a disjuncture and lag between theory and practice (and vice versa).

What Is Effective Leadership in practice?

There is consensus that a more collaborative and networked governance paradigm is now being practised, which for evolving public sector leadership, lends itself to more collective, collaborative and relational styles of leadership. At the same time, public sector leaders face increasingly complex challenges (such as VUCA, digital governance, devolved decision making etc) which for leadership may lend itself to more adaptive, paradoxical, and entrepreneurial leadership approaches. Public sectors also need to embody a growing set of values alongside increasing public accountability on matters such as (although not limited to) equity, diversity, stewardship and integrity. These expectations lend themselves to more shared/ distributed and authentic leadership approaches. Whilst acknowledging overlap and interconnectedness, the following table (Table 1) attempts to broadly categorise approaches:

Table 1 Emergent leadership styles and contemporary governance themes

1	For collaborative and networked governance paradigms	E.g. at a macro level, the context within which public governance plays out	1. Collective 2. Collaborative 3. Relational
2	For complex challenges	E.g. VUCA, digital governance, devolved decision making etc	1. Adaptive 2. Paradoxical 3. Entrepreneurial
3	For values and increasing public accountability	E.g. equity, diversity, stewardship, integrity, etc	1. Shared/Distributed 2. Authentic

What Is Missing and What Is Needed Next?

There are a range of areas and issues that appear to be missing or overlooked in the literature that we know matter in practice. These include leading at and across all levels, digital and virtual leadership, intersectionality, non-western perspectives, newer strands (such as entrepreneurial leadership), evidenced based leadership development and impact into practice. It is important to note that both leadership theories and approaches to development are shifting and changing all the time- often with a disjuncture between theory and practice. Thus, ways of working that enable the genuine connection between each are needed for the benefit of both.

PART 1: Changes and shifts in public sector leadership

According to Crosby & Bryson (2016), for over fifty years scholars have focused their work on investigating the heroic aspects of leadership¹ with a shift towards studying **post heroic models** of leadership and towards aligning ‘good’ leadership with transformative ideologies of leadership.² Some such as Vivona (2024) argue that the public sector has entered a new leadership era, one that necessitates engaging with new ideas that could help governments address current institutional and societal challenges,³ although how ‘new’ compared to more enduring aspects and manifestations of leadership is contested.

According to Dandalt’s (2024) systematic literature review on public sector leadership in leadership scholarship, public organisations are presented as **integrative systems** which is conceptualised in two main ways.⁴ The first is integrative leadership which tends to be defined in terms of collaborative governance,⁵ taking a macro policy and institutional view of leadership. Dandalt (2024) explains that within this construct, public organisations are studied as institutions involved in multi-sector collaboration with private sector organisations and other institutions for the creation of public value. The second construct under which the idea of integrative systems is presented is a relational understanding of shared/ distributed leadership. As such, Dandalt (2024) notes that it is fair to say that public organisations are chiefly presented as flat organisations in the literature, with interest on shared leadership as it intersects with formal (hierarchical) leadership, and not informal leadership despite scholarly interest on the issue and application of shared leadership beyond only formal leadership roles.⁶

Paradigm and connected leadership shifts

The degree of recent changes incorporated into public sector leadership literature depends on which paradigm of public administration you perceive we are currently in. This is contested by scholars and difficult to generalise across different contexts. The largely Anglo- western assumption is that we are in a **collaborative governance paradigm** at present. There is a growing range of different approaches advocated for, although the extent to which some or all are ‘new’ is contested. This transition is generally seen as an evolution from ‘New Public Service’⁷ to ‘New Public Governance’ which tends to emphasise the relationship between public servants and citizens and calls attention to the collaborative spaces where they develop.⁸ As this collaborative approach has consolidated, there has been a shift from the ‘heroic leader’ in policy contexts, to more collective forms in which leaders from all sectors share the goal of making life better for communities.⁹ Van Wart (2013) summarises how ‘new leadership dialogues’ tend to have evolved due to four main critiques of ‘traditional leadership theory’, including that past ones were: (1) too hierarchical, heroic,

¹ See Crosby & Bryson (2018).

² See Carmichael (2024). Please note this is a summary of a Masters thesis and not peer reviewed research.

³ See Vivona (2024); Virtanen & Tammeaid (2020); as cited in Dandalt (2024), p.2.

⁴ See Armistead et al., (2007); Morse (2010); Page (2010); Sun & Anderson (2012) as cited in Dandalt (2024), p.6.

⁵ See Crosby & Bryson (2010) as cited in Dandalt (2024), p.6.

⁶ Dandalt (2024), p.6.

⁷ According to Bryson et al (2014) ‘New Public Service’ is generally understood as recognising the importance of ‘inclusive dialogue and deliberation’ (p.447), including representatives from many sectors in the creation and maintenance of public value, extending beyond traditional measures of efficiency and effectiveness to incorporate ‘the full range of democratic and constitutional values’ (p 446). See Bryson, J. M., Crosby, B. C., & Bloomberg, L. (2014). Public value governance: Moving beyond traditional public administration and the new public management. *Public Administration Review*, 74(4), 445–456. doi:10.1111/puar.12238

⁸ See Denhardt & Denhardt (2015); Pollitt & Bouckaert (2011); Thomson & Perry (2006) as cited in Ospina (2017), p.277.

⁹ See Brookes & Grint (2010) as cited in Ospina (2017), p. 277.

and power-centric; (2) too disconnected from systems; (3) too disconnected from ethical values; and (4) too biased towards logical positivist methods.¹⁰

The change (or evolution) in paradigms requires a change (or evolution) in leadership styles. Ospina (2017) explains that there has been a **shift from transformational to collective leadership theory**¹¹ to better reflect the change in paradigm (although the degree of change is contested) with calls for broader conceptualisations of public leadership to better reflect network and collaborative forms of governance.¹² This includes an emphasis on collaborative and partnership processes leading to shared outcomes among agencies and sectors, and greater democratic accountability to ensure responsiveness and inclusiveness.¹³ Other scholars use different terms and different definitions that tend to refer to the similar phenomenon of more collective approaches to and styles of collective leadership. For example, Van Wart (2013) details collaborative models of leadership in organisational settings have been popular,¹⁴ sometimes referred to as and/or or sharing elements of **'integrative leadership'** (largely community based with administration taking a subsidiary role),¹⁵ **'distributed leadership'**¹⁶ (drawing on community-based, collaborative network and partnership literature),¹⁷ **'facilitative leadership'**¹⁸ (in political discourse), **'new public service leadership'**¹⁹ or **'public values leadership'**²⁰ (when collaborative leadership has a strong values component). Recent scholarship reflects the **diversity of public leadership functions**. For example, according to Getha-Taylor et al (2009) leadership activities that emphasise the intermediary roles of public administrators in engaging diverse stakeholders and interests are reflected in transformational,²¹ catalytic,²² collaborative,²³ and facilitative perspectives of leadership.²⁴ According to Morgan et al (2018) newer leadership work has addressed some of the specific **adaptive challenges** that public sector leaders are facing such as funding constraints, technological pressures, and recruitment profiles.²⁵

Thus, from a general reading of the literature it appears as though many contemporary changes in the public sector are reflected in public sector leadership in the context of the shift towards collaborative governance. As Marcy (2024) notes, while **skills in collaboration** are clearly important to leaders in the private sector, they are arguably of a higher importance in the public sector because of the requirement to answer to a greater number of stakeholders, less autonomy in roles, and often flatter (horizontal) organisational initiatives²⁶ with weight placed on training **competencies in collaboration and cross-organisational team building**.²⁷ While there is some debate regarding the utility of some sets of competencies being used in the public sector (often due to their unadulterated importation from the private sector),²⁸ the larger issue at hand is not always a matter of 'if' (as in, whether competencies are important or not) as much as it is 'to what degree' or 'how much' (as in, 'how much of each competency should be emphasised given the context, and at what cost to other competencies/processes etc).²⁹

¹⁰ Van Wart (2013), p.535.

¹¹ Ospina (2017), p. 277. See also Dunoon (2002). Empirical analysis include McGuire & Silvia (2009); Van Wart & Kapucu (2011).

¹² Ospina (2017).

¹³ Ospina (2017), p.277; Van Wart (2013), p. 531; Getha-Taylor et al (2011), p.89. Crosby, B. C., & Bryson, J. M. (2017). Why leadership of public leadership research matters: and what to do about it. *Public Management Review*, 20 (9): 1265–1286. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2017.1348731>

¹⁴ See Ansell & Gash (2008); Crosby & Bryson (2005) as cited in Van Wart (2013), p.531.

¹⁵ See Bono et al. (2010); Ospina & Foldy (2010); Page (2010) as cited in Van Wart (2013), p.531.

¹⁶ Lawler (2008); Timperley (2005) as cited in Van Wart (2013), p.531.

¹⁷ See Armistead et al. (2007); Lester & Krejci (2007); Sullivan et al. (2012) as cited in Van Wart (2013), p.534.

¹⁸ See Greasley & Stoker (2008); Vogelsang-Coombs (2007); Svara (1994) as cited in Van Wart (2013), p.531.

¹⁹ See Denhardt & Campbell (2006); Denhardt & Denhardt (2003) as cited in Van Wart (2013), p.531.

²⁰ See Getha-Taylor (2009) as cited in Van Wart (2013), p. 531.

²¹ See Gingrich (2007); Kee & Newcomer (2008) as cited in Getha-Taylor et al (2011), p.89.

²² See Luke (1992) as cited in Getha-Taylor et al (2011), p.89.

²³ See Bingham & O'Leary (2008); Crislip & Larson (1994); Huxham & Vangen (2000) as cited in Getha-Taylor et al (2011), p.89.

²⁴ See Svara (1994) as cited in Getha-Taylor et al (2011), p.89.

²⁵ See Morgan et al (2018) as cited in Marcy (2023), p.269.

²⁶ See Lord et al (1986); Iles et al (2004) as cited in Marcy (2023), p.264.

²⁷ See Ingraham & Getha-Taylor (2004) as cited in Marcy (2023), p. 264. See also Van Wart (2011) regarding team building.

²⁸ See Mau (2009) as cited in Marcy (2023), p.268.

²⁹ See Kaplan & Kaiser (2006); Quinn et al. (2010) as cited in Marcy (2023), p.268.

Other shifts in understanding and practice

Many other shifts in public leadership and related capabilities have coincided with the evolution towards a collaborative public administration paradigm. Three key shifts are detailed briefly here, boundary spanning, leadership as craft and embodied leadership.

Boundary spanning

In the mid-1990s to early 2000's there was a 'boundary spanner' movement in public administration. This emerged from the need for the public servants, referred to as '**boundary spanners**', to work across silos and internal and external organisational boundaries to create public value.³⁰ Doing so requires cognitive (information processing, content expertise, analytical thinking), social (communication, political savvy, conflict resolution) and emotional (empathy, self-awareness, self-confidence) competencies. According to Van Meerkerk & Edelenbos (2020) four key activities include information collection and knowledge exchange, relational activities, coordinating and negotiating with internal and external actors, and mediation and facilitating cooperation.³¹

Leadership as a craft

Around the same time there was a simultaneous shift to viewing public administration as **a craft**, and therefore, so too public sector leadership.³² This movement generally argued that the work of public administration should be characterised as 'an art and a craft, as much as it is a science'.³³ Rhodes (2016) argued that due to the primacy of politics in the work of top political-administrators, traditional '**craft skills**' of counselling, stewardship, prudence, probity, judgment, diplomacy, and political nous remain relevant.³⁴ Tiernan (2015) detailed how a '**craft perspective**' draws our attention to the importance of mastery and 'apprenticeship' style of developing and refining the repertoire of necessary skills and experience, including professional identity, good governance, adaptability, and the ability and willingness to learn from experience.³⁵ This has since been picked up in the Australian Public Service (APS) since 2021 coinciding with the launch of the APS Academy. According to the **APS Academy**, there are six 'craft' areas of public administration, one of which is the craft of 'leadership and management' defined as 'driving organisational productivity and performance through inspiration towards a common goal'.³⁶ According to the APS Academy, 'effective leaders' must: demonstrate ethical leadership, leading for wellbeing and valuing diversity and inclusion; navigate complexity within a strategic and political context to achieve positive outcomes; scan the horizon for emerging trends, identifying opportunities and challenges and inspiring a collective purpose; skilfully influence stakeholders to ensure complex relationships are productive; and provide frank and fearless advice in order to create integrity and impact in services.³⁷ The APS 'Integrated Leadership System' (ILS) provides capability guidance in the form of descriptions and behaviours for all levels in the APS to chart leadership development.³⁸

³⁰ Sullivan, H., & Skelcher, C. (2002). *Working across boundaries: Collaboration in public services*. Palgrave.; Carey, G., Buick, F., Pescud, M., & Malbon, E. (2017). Preventing Dysfunction and Improving Policy Advice: The Role of Intra-Departmental Boundary Spanners. *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, 76(2):176-186. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8500.12213>

³¹ Van Meerkerk, I., & Edelenbos, J. (2021). Becoming a Competent Boundary Spanning Public Servant. In: Sullivan, H., Dickinson, H., Henderson, H. (eds). *The Palgrave Handbook of the Public Servant*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-29980-4_39. See also ANZSOG. (2020). Becoming a boundary spanning public servant. ANZSOG Research, October 6. <https://anzsog.edu.au/research-insights-and-resources/research/becoming-a-boundary-spanning-public-servant/#:~:text=Becoming%20a%20competent%20boundary%20spanning,education%2C%20training%20and%20development%20programs>.

³² Tiernan, A. (2015). Craft and Capacity in the Public Service. *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, 74(1): 53-62. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8500.12134>.

³³ Rhodes, R. (2016). Recovering the Craft of Public Administration. *Public Administration Review*, 76(4), 638-647. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24757548>, p.639.

³⁴ Ibid, p.638.

³⁵ Tiernan (2015), p. 60-61.

³⁶ APS Academy. (n.d). Leadership and management. Australian Government. Accessed 5/9/24. <https://www.apsacademy.gov.au/aps-craft/leadership-management>

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Australian Public Service Commission. (2021). Integrated Leadership System (ILS). Australian Government. Accessed 5/9/24. <https://www.apsc.gov.au/working-aps/aps-employees-and-managers/classifications/integrated-leadership-system-ils>

Embodied leadership

The embodied leadership movement generally argues that ‘cognitive-only’ leadership development (gaining new insights or understanding new concepts) is limited and does not necessarily capture *how* to embody the virtues of effective leadership.³⁹ **Learning to embody leadership** is understood as a process of consciously aligning purpose with presence so that they are experienced and witnessed as one,⁴⁰ and typically draws on somatics, neuroscience, psychology and sociology.⁴¹ According to Brendel & Bennett (2016), an integrated pedagogy that enables individuals to access and embody a ‘way of being’ is required with reputable organisations experimenting with holistic learning methodologies, including mindfulness and somatics practices. Embodied leadership is an approach where individuals learn ways to deepen their awareness to include both the mind and body as an interdependent system and to remain open, grounded, and engaged in a way that builds resilience, and resourcefulness, and improves relationships in complex environments.⁴² Whilst this movement gained popularity in other fields, its presence in public administrative literature has remained somewhat limited.

³⁹ Hamill, P. (2013). *Embodied leadership: The somatic approach to developing your leadership*. Kogan Page, Great Britain, p. xiv.

⁴⁰ Brendel, W., & Bennett, C. (2016). Learning to Embody Leadership Through Mindfulness and Somatics Practice. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 18(3): 409-425. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1523422316646068>, p.410.

⁴¹ Hamill, P. (2013), p.xiv.

⁴² Brendel & Bennett (2016), p.409.

PART 2: What is effective public sector leadership?

The question of ‘effectiveness’ including how it is defined and can be measured is complex and difficult to gauge. There is a lack of peer reviewed research on the ‘effectiveness’ of different approaches, how they compare, are taught and with what impact. For example, Chapman et al (2016) reviewed twenty-five years of public service leadership research (1987-2012) from leading public administration journals. Their analysis found that there were more than 20 distinct theories for how public leadership is studied with an ‘unequivocal finding’ that there is **no one dominant theoretical framework for defining and assessing public leadership**.⁴³ Research that does exist is contextually dependent with the extent to which it is generalisable less clear. For example, Haslam et al (2024) emphasise, the form and content of leadership will always change, *and need to change*, to reflect the nature of the group being led- its norms, and values, its history and culture, its goals and aspirations.⁴⁴ They detail how this also explains why a key task of leadership is not only to understand these things but to also actively shape them,⁴⁵ and the reason why, wherever one looks-whether across groups or within a single group- upon close inspection leadership hardly ever looks the same when it emerges in different places and thus generally very ‘messy’.⁴⁶ Whilst acknowledging these complexities and limitations, the following section provides a summary of what is generally understood to be aspects of effective contemporary public sector leadership.

Contemporary Public Sector Leadership

Research indicates that the growing complexity of public sector environments necessitate new leadership approaches. Traditional, linear, and hierarchical leadership models are being replaced by a focus on relational aspects, reflecting a broader transition in leadership development. The literature further highlights the increasing importance of **whole-of-organisation** and **system-wide approaches**, alongside an increasing emphasis on leadership behaviours that enable effective performance under conditions of heightened uncertainty.

The following section is divided into four related parts. The first considers the systems focus, especially relevant given the increasing complexity and uncertainty that the public service faces. The second focuses on behaviours required and the benefits of taking a paradoxical leadership lens. The third concerns the general shift towards more collaborative and relational approaches for leadership development in the public sector. The fourth focuses on the context and positive indicators for public sector leadership development.

1. Systems focus

The shift from older leadership models to a whole-of-organisation or systems approach has occurred in response to the limitations of traditional methods in dealing with the complexities of the modern public sector. Traditional models often failed to account for the dynamic and interconnected nature of public sector challenges, leading to inefficiencies and missed opportunities for innovation. A **systems leadership approach** emphasises the interconnectedness of various organisational components, promoting a more holistic and adaptive leadership style. This transition suggests that organisations with integrated leadership frameworks are better equipped to navigate uncertainty and drive sustainable change.⁴⁷

⁴³ Chapman et al (2016), p. 121.

⁴⁴ Haslam et al (2024), p.6

⁴⁵ See Reicher & Hopkins (1996, 2001); Reicher et al., (2005) as cited in Haslam et al (2024), p.6.

⁴⁶ See Blom & Alvesson (2015b, p.978) as cited in Haslam et al (2024), p.6.

⁴⁷ Bolden, R., Gulati, A. and Edwards, G., (2020). Mobilizing change in public services: insights from a systems leadership development intervention. *International Journal of Public Administration*, 43(1):26-36.

This shift towards a **systems leadership approach** is driven by the recognition that isolated or siloed leadership strategies are insufficient to address the complex, interdependent challenges faced by modern public sector organisations.⁴⁸ Traditional leadership models often focused on top-down, linear and hierarchical structures where decision-making is centralised and segmented across different departments. However, these models have often been inadequate in fostering innovation, adaptability, and resilience in a rapidly changing environment. Ongoing issues with these approaches have also been identified, for example regarding succession planning and leadership pipelines.

In recent years, the concept of **‘whole systems change’** that extends across organisational boundaries has sparked interest in the design and delivery of public services and leadership development. The strand of leadership studies that look at **‘whole of organisation’** approaches encompasses a wide variety of perspectives. These can be seen to include **collaborative, collective, distributed, integrative, shared** and **systems approaches** to leadership and leadership development.⁴⁹ These perspectives, while diverse and contested, have a number of similarities, including a common commitment to extending leadership theory and practice beyond the traits and behaviours of individual leaders. They further emphasise a contextually situated understanding of the collective and relational dynamics of leadership.

In the public sector, systems thinking can encompass the setting and implementation of public policy across an entire domain of public services. The boundaries of a whole system can be local, regional, national, or even international. For instance, a comprehensive view of children’s services would include housing, education, health, welfare, and criminal justice. As the scope of a system expands, the number of variables influencing decision-making increases significantly, creating a complex system where complete knowledge is insufficient to predict outcomes. Hospitals, community health, and social care services have long been viewed as an integrated and interdependent systems. This perspective has now extended beyond health and social care to include systems leadership in broader society, effectively forming a complex system.⁵⁰ Systems leadership has been primarily conceptualised and operationalised as a strategy for mobilising large-scale transformation and change, rather than as a means for enhancing organisational performance.

According to Bolden et al (2020) systems leadership is defined by two main characteristics: it represents a **collective form of leadership**, emphasising the coordinated efforts of numerous individuals collaborating across various locations within the system and at different levels, and it **transcends boundaries**, both physical and virtual, operating concurrently in multiple dimensions.⁵¹

Systems leadership is now **used in government practice**. For example, in January 2023 the UK Government released systems leadership guidance on ‘How to be a systems leader’.⁵² Accordingly, a ‘systems leader’ will:

- Influence other leaders to shift the collective focus in the right direction and develop and maintain cross-departmental and cross-directorate relationships so there are shared understanding of goals and of the system.
- Encourage the use of systems principles and tools for complex problems by promoting collaboration across traditional siloes, within or outside the team.
- Think about the wider system and ask questions that explore the possible impact of certain actions on the wider system.

⁴⁸ See: Dreier, L, Nabarro, D, Nelson, J. (2019). Systems Leadership for Sustainable Development: Strategies for achieving systemic change, Harvard Kennedy School, available via: [Systems Leadership.pdf \(harvard.edu\)](https://www.harvard.edu/systems-leadership)

⁴⁹ See Zeier, K., Plimmer, G. and Franken, E., (2021). Developing shared leadership in a public organisation: Processes, paradoxes and consequences. *Journal of Management & Organization*, 27(3):564-581, Dreier, L., Nabarro, D., & Nelson J. (2019). Harvard Kennedy School, Systems Leadership for Sustainable Development, available via: [Systems Leadership.pdf \(harvard.edu\)](https://www.harvard.edu/systems-leadership); Ospina (2017).

⁵⁰ See AcademiWales (n.d). [Adaptive Leadership](https://www.academiwales.gov.uk/systems-leadership). Government of Wales; Ballantyne P, Jackson D, Temperley J., Jopling M., & Lieberman A. (2006). System leadership in action: Leading networks leading the system, National College for School Leadership.

⁵¹ Bolden, Gulati & Edwards (2020).

⁵² UK Government. (2023). Systems Leadership Guide: how to be a systems leader. Published January 12.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/systems-leadership-guide-for-civil-servants/systems-leadership-guide-how-to-be-a-systems-leader>

- Ensure positive changes towards shared goals are sustained through monitoring and evaluating progress towards them.⁵³

2. Leadership behaviours

As organisations and systems grow in size and complexity, there is an increasing emphasis on identifying and cultivating the specific leadership behaviours and capabilities necessary to meet evolving needs. The shift towards focusing on leadership behaviours, with a focus on managing complexity, in the public sector stems from the increasing uncertainty of the environment, increased pressures for accountability and performance, and the need to move away from traditional hierarchical models.⁵⁴ Public expectations for transparency and **ethical leadership** have also highlighted the importance of adaptive, relational, and effective leadership behaviours in driving organisational success and meeting the demands of modern public administration.

Paradoxical leadership is an emerging approach to developing skills and behaviours to meet the increasing complexity of public sector leadership. It brings together leadership skills and capabilities that are understood to support the management of complexity, competing demands and the paradoxes of leadership in the public sector. Paradoxical leadership has been defined as ‘leader’s sense-giving to followers about the necessity to execute contradictory yet interrelated behaviours to constructively deal with paradoxes and tensions in their work environment’.⁵⁵

Research on paradoxical leadership synthesises much of the contemporary thinking on leadership in complex and dynamic environments. Paradoxical leadership involves leaders simultaneously embracing and balancing opposing yet interdependent elements within an organisation. This approach is thought to be especially effective in complex and dynamic settings, such as the public sector, where leaders are often required to navigate competing interests and goals. For instance, public sector leaders must balance transparency with confidentiality or efficiency with thoroughness. Successfully managing these paradoxes allows leaders to maintain a long-term and strategic vision.

Paradoxical leadership is geared towards navigating complexity, developing problem solving capabilities, managing change, and fostering collaboration. Leaders at all levels within the hierarchy play a crucial role in managing organisational paradoxes.⁵⁶ They can help followers make sense of these paradoxes by encouraging them to accept such contradictions as inevitable and demonstrate how to deal with them effectively. Leaders who are aware of organisational paradoxes are better equipped to apply a 'both/and' perspective, making them more effective in leading people through complex, ambiguous, and contradictory work situations compared to those who lack this ability.⁵⁷ For instance, when employees face conflicting demands, they often experience feelings of threat, insecurity, and anxiety, which can lead to defensive responses or a focus on one aspect while neglecting the other. Leaders who provide guidance can reduce these negative feelings and help rebalance priorities in the workplace, thereby improving employees’ wellbeing and performance.

Paradoxical leadership involves embracing and managing contradictions effectively. There are several broad **categories of behaviours** that are positively associated with this leadership style, these include:⁵⁸

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ See: Tummers, L. & Knies, E. (2014). The public leadership questionnaire: The development and validation of five dimensions of public leadership behaviours, Paper for IRSPM https://repub.eur.nl/pub/51018/Metis_198272.pdf; Mutonyi, B.R., Slåtten, T. & Lien, G., (2020). Empowering leadership, work group cohesiveness, individual learning orientation and individual innovative behaviour in the public sector: empirical evidence from Norway. *International Journal of Public Leadership*, 16(2), pp.175-197.

⁵⁵ Sparr, van Knippenberg & Kearney (2015) as cited in Backhaus, L., Reuber, A., Vogel, D. and Vogel, R., (2022). Giving sense about paradoxes: paradoxical leadership in the public sector. *Public Management Review*, 24(9), p 3.

⁵⁶ Backhaus et al (2022).

⁵⁷ Ibid, p.5.

⁵⁸ See: Batool, U., Raziq, M., & Sarwar, N. (2023). The paradox of paradoxical leadership: a multi-level conceptualization. *Human Resource Management Review*, 33(4):100983. Backhaus et al (2022); Collins, M.D. (2023). A multiperspective approach to paradoxical leadership: the moderating effect of intelligence and trait emotions on leader behavior. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, 44(6): 812-832.

- **Flexibility:** Paradoxical leaders demonstrate the ability to adapt their approach depending on the situation. They can shift between different leadership styles, such as being directive when necessary and empowering when appropriate.
- **Integrative thinking:** Paradoxical leaders are skilled at integrative thinking, meaning they can hold two seemingly contradictory ideas simultaneously and find a solution that synthesises both. Leaders need to be comfortable with uncertainty and complexity. They do not shy away from ambiguous situations but rather see them as opportunities to explore different perspectives and solutions.
- **Inclusive decision-making:** They actively seek out diverse viewpoints and encourage dialogue among team members, fostering an environment where different perspectives are valued and integrated into decision-making processes.
- **Long-term vision:** Paradoxical leaders balance immediate needs with long-term goals. They can focus on achieving short-term results while also considering the future impact of their decisions.
- **Balancing control and autonomy:** These leaders know when to take control of a situation and when to delegate authority. They trust their team members and give them the autonomy to make decisions, while also providing guidance and oversight when needed.
- **Resilience and reflection:** They engage in continuous self-reflection, evaluating their decisions and behaviours to learn from their experiences. This reflective approach helps them to refine their strategies and improve their leadership effectiveness.
- **Emotional intelligence:** Paradoxical leaders demonstrate high levels of empathy and emotional intelligence, enabling them to understand and manage the emotions of others while balancing competing needs and interests.

Paradoxical leadership has been argued by some to encompass the leadership competencies needed by the public sector, now more than ever.⁵⁹ Research by Zhang et al (2015) and Franken et al. (2020) suggests that there are five key paradoxes leaders need to navigate:⁶⁰

1. **Uniformity and individualisation** involves treating followers consistently while also addressing individual needs, allowing their strengths to shine. At the same time, it fosters a structure where team members can contribute confidently without becoming overly competitive or self-centred.
2. **Self- and other-centredness** is about maintaining a strong sense of self, while also having and showing humility to others.
3. **Decision control/autonomy** involves leaders managing subordinate behaviour and decision-making while still granting employees the freedom to act with flexibility and autonomy.
4. **Distance and closeness** is balancing status and role differences with interpersonal connections—is likely to lead employees to view their leaders as charismatic and empowered to make difficult decisions.
5. **Work requirements and flexibility** involves enforcing work requirements while also allowing flexibility. This approach establishes norms and standards within defined work environments, promoting fairness and clarifying roles, which are key factors in fostering positive job attitudes and behaviours.⁶¹

As with all approaches, there are **limitations**. While paradoxical leadership offers a powerful approach to dealing with complexity and ambiguity, it is not without its challenges. According to Batool, Raziq & Sarwar (2023) leaders must be aware of the potential pitfalls, such as cognitive strain, communication difficulties, and the risk of inaction, and work to mitigate these issues to effectively apply paradoxical leadership in practice.⁶²

⁵⁹ Franken, E., Plimmer, G. and Malinen, S. (2020). Paradoxical leadership in public sector organisations: Its role in fostering employee resilience. *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, 79(1): 93-110.

⁶⁰ Zhang, Y., Waldman, D. A., Han, Y.-L., & Li, X.-B. (2015). Paradoxical leader behaviors in people management: Antecedents and consequences. *Academy of Management Journal*, 58(2), 538–566; Franken et al (2020).

⁶¹ Summarised and adapted from: IPAA, Is paradoxical leadership the competency we need now more than ever? Available via: [Is paradoxical leadership the competency we need now, more than ever? - Institute of Public Administration Australia \(IPAA\)](#)

⁶² Batool, Raziq & Sarwar (2023).

3. Relational approaches to developing leadership capabilities

Beyond managing complexity and uncertainty there is increasing interest in the relational aspect of leadership development. A relational approach to leadership development emphasises the cultivation of leadership as a ‘collective phenomenon that is shared among people’ with leadership skills developed through **interpersonal relationships, teams, networks and organisations**.⁶³ Instead of focusing solely on individual competencies, this approach tends to prioritise mentorship, collaborative learning, emotional intelligence, and open communication. Leaders develop by building trust, engaging in reflective practice, and fostering strong networks, which enhances their ability to lead effectively within complex organisational environments.⁶⁴

A relational approach to leadership emphasises the importance of relationships, collaboration, and interconnectedness between leaders and their followers. In the public sector, where services directly impact communities and require coordination among various stakeholders, adopting a relational leadership approach is particularly beneficial. This approach fosters trust, enhances communication, and promotes effective collaboration, all of which are essential for delivering public services efficiently and ethically. According to Hastings et al (2024) relational-focused leaders can be seen to be ‘working in organisations as network connectors, conversation facilitators, and coaches’.⁶⁵

In the public sector, this approach is particularly valuable due to the need for collaboration across diverse agencies and stakeholders. By developing leaders who are adept at building relationships and maintaining public trust, organisations can become more resilient, inclusive, and capable for managing change. This relational focus contributes to a **positive organisational culture** and ensures leadership capacity at all levels, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness and sustainability of public sector institutions.

In 2023 ANZSOG collaborated with the Queensland Public Service Commission (QPSC) and the Centre for Social Impact (CSI) at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) on a research project to address system-wide challenges of leadership development, including career transitions and generational transformation in the context of capability planning for the QPSC. The project identified several problems with traditional conceptualisations of leadership and approaches, whilst also indicating a shift towards relational approaches.⁶⁶ Criticisms of past approaches, as summarised in the ANZSOG report (2024), include that they tended to focus on:

- A single destination for leadership may not be appropriate for diverse natural abilities and cultural backgrounds.
- A linear progression of steps does not always reflect how adult development occurs in practice.
- A focus on knowledge and skill acquisition that overlooks the changes in leaders’ cognitive frames and identities which denote their progression from novice to expert leaders.
- An emphasis on individual development, with little attention paid to relational capabilities that empower teams and the collective.⁶⁷ This oversight becomes important as organisational systems become more complex, as it becomes increasingly hard for an individual leader to make all required decisions. For leaders to thrive in complex systems they must focus on creating environments where wider teams can step forward and positively contribute to desired outcomes.

⁶³ McCauley, C & Palus, C. (2021). Developing the theory and practice of leadership development: A relational view. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 32(5):101456, p.1.

⁶⁴ See: Kinder, T., Stenvall, J., Six, F., & Memon, A. (2021). Relational leadership in collaborative governance ecosystems, *Public Management Review*, 23(11): 1612-1639; McCauley & Palus (2021).

⁶⁵ Hastings, B., Gary, S., Jackson, C., Criado-Perez, C., Cahill, A., Hodroj, B., & Cunico, G. (2024). Leadership Capability Framework for the Queensland public sector: Interim evidence review, ANZSOG. p.24. https://anzsog.edu.au/app/uploads/2024/03/RIQPSCMarch_RI.pdf

⁶⁶ Hastings et al (2024).

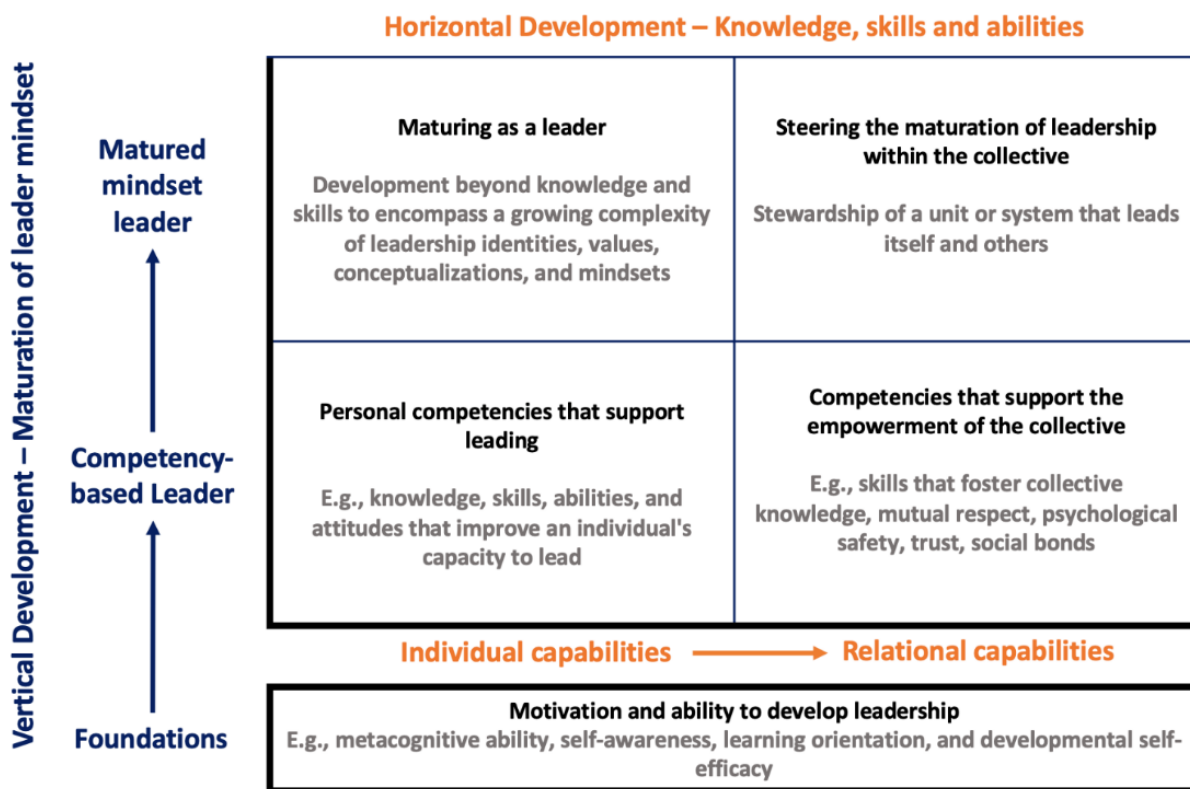
⁶⁷ DeRue, D & Myers, C. (2014). Leadership development: A review and agenda for future research, in *The Oxford handbook of leadership and organisations*, Oxford Library of Psychology, pp832-856.

- Important factors such as cultural awareness and ‘cultural diversity’ are add-ons to traditional frameworks as opposed to core leadership principles.

Past approaches also fail to delineate adult development processes that promote leadership maturation in the journey from novice to expert. Whereas a shared understanding, philosophy, identity, and the capacity to function collectively, are essential.⁶⁸

To address these limitations, one approach has been identified is the ‘Wallace 2D Leadership Framework’ (or architecture).The authors argue that such a framework ‘is necessary to move away from traditional linear frameworks of leader development competencies, and their matched development pathways, to consider the multi-dimensional nature of leaders and how leadership maturation and leadership competencies evolve’.⁶⁹ Wallace *et al.* (2021)⁷⁰ provide an extensive review of the leadership development and competency literature leading to the formulation of a two-dimensional (2D) framework that addresses these deficits. This framework is shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: The Wallace 2D Framework as adapted by Hastings et.al, 2026



Source: Wallace 2D Framework (2021) adapted by Hastings, B., Gary, S., Jackson, C., Criado-Perez, C., Cahill, A., Hodroj, B. & Cunico, G. (2025). *Relational Leadership: An approach to Public Sector Capability Development*, ANZSOG, p.16.

⁶⁸ Hastings et al (2024), p.14-15.

⁶⁹ Hastings, et al (2024), p.15.

⁷⁰ Wallace, D., Torres, E., & Zaccaro, S. (2021). Just what do we think we are doing? Learning outcomes of leader and leadership development, *The Leadership Quarterly*, 32(5):101494.

The Wallace 2D framework outlines **three levels of leadership**: self-leadership, competency-based leadership, and mindset-based leadership, integrated with personal motivation, skill acquisition, and holistic leadership values. In this framework, **vertical development** focuses on the evolution of adult cognition, crucial for modern leadership in complex, interconnected environments. It is adopted from leadership science that links mature mindsets to organisational success. **Horizontal development** contrasts individual leadership (directing and managing) with relational leadership (promoting collective action and empowerment), emphasising environments where team members can thrive. Relational leadership enhances team effectiveness and success in organisational change, particularly in complex systems like large organisations and government agencies. Whilst there is limited peer reviewed research on the effectiveness of this approach (possibly due to its newness) it is having impact in practice with the QPSC collaborating with UNSW to pilot this approach to develop leadership at scale.

Other approaches that emphasise the relational

Many of the current approaches to leadership also emphasise the relational. For example, generally, **transformational leadership** focuses on inspiring and motivating followers by fostering strong emotional connections and shared vision. **Servant leadership** emphasises serving others, prioritising the growth and well-being of team members and communities. **Participative (democratic) leadership** involves team members in decision-making processes, promoting collective responsibility and open dialogue. **Collaborative leadership** brings diverse stakeholders together, fostering cooperation and shared goals. **Authentic leadership** is grounded in self-awareness and transparency, building trust through genuine relationships, while **inclusive leadership** ensures diverse perspectives are valued and integrated into decision-making processes.

Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) approach

Another is the Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) approach which **focuses on the quality of the relationships** between leaders and their followers. Unlike traditional leadership models that treat leadership as a uniform process, LMX emphasises that leaders develop unique, individualised relationships with each team member.⁷¹ These relationships can vary in quality, with high-quality exchanges characterised by trust, mutual respect, and strong support, often leading to higher job satisfaction and performance. In contrast, low-quality exchanges might involve more formal, distant interactions with less personal engagement. The LMX approach suggests that leaders should strive to develop and maintain positive, high-quality relationships with all members to foster a more cohesive and productive work environment.

Cultivating social identity

Another key step in leadership development thinking has been around cultivating social identity. To foster relational leadership skills, including collective leadership identities, leaders should involve team members actively in the leadership process, meaning that 'leadership is *shared* between team members and that leaders use strategies to form a collective social identity'.⁷²

Cultivating social identity in leadership development involves integrating and strengthening a shared sense of identity among team members as part of the leadership process. Social identity, which refers to an individual's sense of belonging based on group memberships, plays a crucial role in building group cohesion, enhancing motivation, and shaping organisational culture.⁷³ Leaders who actively cultivate social identity can inspire team members to align their personal goals with the group's objectives, fostering inclusivity and ensuring that diverse perspectives are integrated into the group's identity. This approach also enhances leadership effectiveness by aligning the leader with the group's

⁷¹ See Tummers, L.G. & Knies, E. (2013). Leadership and Meaningful Work in the Public Sector. *Public Administration Review*, 73(6): 859-868. <https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.12138>; Yeo, M., Ananthram, S., Teo, S., & Pearson, C. (2013). Leader-Member Exchange and Relational Quality in a Singapore Public Sector Organization. *Public Management Review*, 17(10): 1379-1402. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2013.806573>; Ospina (2017); Hastings et al (2024), p.30.

⁷² Hastings et al (2024), p.32.

⁷³ Virtanen, P & Tammeaid, M. (2020). *Developing public sector leadership*. Springer, p. 75.

values and goals, making them more influential. Additionally, during times of change, a strong social identity provides stability, enabling leaders to guide their teams through transitions more smoothly.⁷⁴

One approach to cultivating social identity, identified in ANZSOG's research on Relational Leadership, is the 5R approach that was developed by Fransen et al in 2020.⁷⁵ This approach provides a process for the development of a collective social identity by working through a sequence of questions in five categories in a team workshop environment:

1. **Readying** - Who are we? Defining the team's shared identity by reflecting on the team's core values and assembling them in a trademark.
2. **Reflecting** - What do we want to be? Identifying the team's aspirations with respect to task, motivational, social, and external aspects.
3. **Representing** - How do we become what we want to be? Embedding the team's identity in practice by implementing strategies to achieve team goals.
4. **Realising** - Are we becoming what we want to be? Monitoring progress towards team goals and troubleshooting.
5. **Reporting** – Are we becoming what we want to be? Monitoring progress towards team goals and troubleshooting.⁷⁶

Growth-oriented leadership in the public sector

The growing complexity of demands in public administration calls for more effective employee behaviours, which public sector leaders have the potential to cultivate- though many are unsure how to do so. Growth-oriented leadership (GOL) offers a method to achieve this. It is broadly understood as a leadership approach that **prioritises the continuous development and empowerment of team members**. It focuses on fostering innovation and promoting a long-term vision for sustainable growth. Leaders focus on personal and professional growth, encourage creativity and adaptability, and empower their teams by delegating responsibilities and fostering autonomy. They act as mentors and coaches, providing guidance and support, while cultivating a positive, inclusive culture that values collaboration and resilience. This approach is centred on creating an environment where both individuals and the organisation can thrive and achieve their full potential.⁷⁷

In essence, GOL are actions taken to enhance employees' abilities to better cope with changes and pressures within public institutions. Instead of focusing on specific job-related skills or encouraging pro-organisational behaviours like organisational citizenship, GOL seeks to develop individuals' capabilities to support their personal growth and adaptability.⁷⁸

According to Franken et al. (2020) there are five dimensions:⁷⁹

1. **Managing the whole team** refers to 'fostering collaboration within the team, by setting collective tasks, involving people, and normalising collaboration to foster network leveraging and learning'.

⁷⁴ Ibid, p.75.

⁷⁵ Fransen, K., Haslam, S.A., Steffens, N.K., Peters, K., Mallett, C.J., Mertens, N. & Boen, F. (2020). All for us and us for all: Introducing the 5R Shared Leadership Program. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 51, p.101762.

⁷⁶ Adapted from Hastings et al (2024), p. 34-5.

⁷⁷ Franken et al. (2021).

⁷⁸ ANZSOG. (2021). *Building people up: Growth-oriented leadership in the public*, ANZSOG News, November 15. Franken et al (2020).

⁷⁹ Franken et al. (2021) For 1 see p.673; 2 see p. 676; 3 see p.678; 4 see p.679; 5 see p.681.

2. **Enabling self-management** refers to ‘behaviours by line managers which actively encourage employee autonomy, while at the same providing guidance that helps learning and adaptability’.
3. **Recognising individual needs and contributions** refers to ‘the ability of managers to identify and communicate individual achievements in a way that fosters learning’.
4. **Supporting both career and personal growth** refers to ‘managerial support needed to be active rather than passive and include personal support to sustain adaptability and learning’.
5. **Managing safe failures** refers to ‘dealing with mistakes openly and calmly, reframing them as opportunities to learn, rather than failed performance, and eliciting active reflection’.⁸⁰

4. Context and positive indicators for public sector leadership development

Our understanding of how leadership styles and approaches interact with the context in which public sector leadership occurs is complex and limited. When looking at research on approaches to leadership and leadership development it is important to understand that the context in which leadership is practiced varies wildly between both administrative paradigms, traditions, subfields, and at a national and local level, as well as within and across different Departments and agencies- each with their own idiosyncrasies.⁸¹ These are all significant factors that influence how leadership emerges, is practiced, and can be developed.

Positive indicators for leadership development

Whilst the contexts in which leadership is practiced varies, research tends to support several key practices that can be considered positive indicators for leadership development. Research highlights the importance of **creating a supportive and nurturing environment** to cultivate capable leaders within the public sector. There are indications that effective leadership development requires a deliberate and strategic approach, focusing on both individual growth and organisational capacity-building. In addition to the importance of cultivating a social identity and growth-oriented approaches detailed above, key environment elements include **ethical culture, inclusive practices, psychosocial safety** and **continuous learning opportunities**.

Ethical culture

Research shows that an **ethical culture** has an influence on the extent of ethical leadership and vice versa.⁸² According to Brown et al (2015) **ethical leadership** includes demonstrating normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and promoting such conduct among followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and in decision-making processes.⁸³ For example, an Australian study by Van der Wal & Demircioglu (2020) used APS Employee Survey data from over 80,000 public servants and found that both ethical culture and ethical leadership not only influence one another but also public sector innovation.⁸⁴ The research revealed three key findings.⁸⁵ First, that a significant relationship exists between employees’ perception of the agency and workgroup culture and leadership as ethical and the realisation of innovation. Second, that ethical leaders positively influence (the agency culture with regard to) realising innovation, whereas the association is less significant for senior managers. Third, in the wake of recent scandals, taking an ‘integrity-based approach’ to further strengthening culture

⁸⁰ Franken et al. (2021)

⁸¹ Backhaus & Vogel (2022)

⁸² Van der Wal, Z., & Demircioglu, MA. (2020). More ethical, more innovative? The effects of ethical culture and ethical leadership on realized innovation. *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, 79(3): 386-404, p.389. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8500.12423>

⁸³ Brown et al (2005).

⁸⁴ Van der Wal & Demircioglu (2020).

⁸⁵ Van der Wal & Demircioglu (2020), p.398-399.

and leadership may be more conducive for fostering innovation than a ‘compliance-based approach’ such as creating new rules, procedures, and institutions.

Inclusive leadership practices

Inclusive leadership practices are crucial for creating collective leadership identities that embrace diversity and inclusion. This relational-based leadership style involves balancing the need for team members to feel included and connected with the need for them to retain their uniqueness and distinctiveness, thus enhancing the team's diversity. Developing inclusive leadership requires efforts at the individual, group, and organisational levels.⁸⁶

According to Hastings et al (2024) at an **individual level**, inclusive leaders shift from traditional leadership views to a more relational and inclusive perspective. This can be progressed by leaders in three ways. First, by focusing on building strong relationships and networks within their team through reciprocal social interactions and building a collective identity. Second, by using their leadership role to facilitate collaboration, challenge dominant practices, and promote equity among team members. Third, by empowering others with attention to transparency and involving team members in decision-making by creating spaces for dialogue and idea-sharing. At a **group level**, inclusive practices for teams include cultivating relationships between leaders and members (such as Leader-Member Exchange detailed above), ensuring high levels of psychological safety (further detail below), and promoting mutual respect and openness among all members. At an **organisational level**, inclusive practices for workplaces can entail inclusive values that leverage individual and intergroup differences among employees, demonstrate stewardship by contributing to and cooperating with the community/ies they serve; and address the needs of disadvantaged groups in the broader environment.⁸⁷

Psychological safety and trust

Fostering a culture of psychological safety and trust is strongly linked to healthy intra-team relationships.⁸⁸ Trust within a team develops when members perceive their vulnerability or risk-taking is respected. Psychological safety is defined as the willingness to voice opinions, ask for help, and take risks without fear of negative repercussions, and promotes openness and transparency.⁸⁹ A culture that protects and promotes psychological safety is shaped by a collective understanding that honesty, feedback, and risk-taking are valued in the workplace. Key elements of psychological safety include a willingness to seek and provide honest feedback, comfort in voicing ideas, the ability to be oneself, and a willingness to collaborate, take risks, and experiment.⁹⁰

According to Edmondson & Lei (2014), a ‘positive interpersonal climate, which is conducive to learning and performance under uncertainty, does not emerge naturally’⁹¹ and even within departments the level of psychological safety and trust can vary from team to team. Developing a culture that promotes psychological safety and trust requires careful planning, strategic intervention and carefully managed and consistent messaging. In this context, **leaders can promote psychological safety** by encouraging people to speak up and challenge the status quo, encouraging the sharing of experimental ideas, demonstrating vulnerability by admitting their own mistakes or lack of knowledge, and providing opportunities for teams to practice new skills in safe environments before high-stakes situations.⁹²

Culture of continuous learning

⁸⁶ See: Booyesen, L. (2013). *The Development of Inclusive Leadership Practice and Processes*, John Wiley & Sons: San Francisco; Ashikali, T., Groeneveld, S. & Kuipers, B. (2021). The role of inclusive leadership in supporting an inclusive climate in diverse public sector teams. *Review of Public Personnel Administration*, 41(3), pp.497-519; Hastings et al (2024).

⁸⁷ Hastings, et al. 2024, pp 29-30.

⁸⁸ Ibid, p 31.

⁸⁹ Edmondson, A., & Lei, Z. (2014). Psychological safety: The history, renaissance, and future of an interpersonal construct, *Annual Review Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behaviour*, 1(1):23-43.

⁹⁰ Ibid (2014)

⁹¹ Edmondson & Lei (2014), p 39.

⁹² Ibid (2014), p 40.

A culture of continuous learning supports public sector leadership development by encouraging ongoing skill enhancement, adaptability, and innovation among leaders. It fosters an environment where leaders are constantly improving their abilities, staying informed about emerging challenges, and effectively responding to changing public needs. This culture also promotes knowledge sharing and collaboration, which strengthens leadership capabilities across the sector, ensuring that leaders are well-equipped to drive positive outcomes and navigate complex issues in the public domain.⁹³ Competencies and behaviours are increasingly essential in the public service, especially at the top levels of management and teaching these in ways that ensures their use on the job is important. This includes tailoring andragogical approaches to the specific context of leadership and leading which can include (although not limited to) face to face teaching (such as case-in-point teaching and peer learning), use of technology (online courses, gamified learning, mobile apps and the use of AI), informal learning (practitioner led learning, learning-by-doing, observational learning), coaching, mentorship programs, and experiential leadership development initiatives⁹⁴ among others.

⁹³ OECD. (2023). Public Employment and Management 2023, available via: [Public Employment and Management 2023 | OECD](#)

⁹⁴ See *ibid*; Marcy (2023), p. 270.

PART 3: What is missing and what is needed next?

We know from working at the intersection of theory and practice that there is often a disjuncture between both, with one leading or lag time in-between (and vice versa). The following section details five main areas including leading at and across levels, digital and virtual leadership, intersectionality critiques, Indigenous leadership and perspectives and newer strands of leadership approaches.

1. Less on leading at and across all levels

To date there appears to be less literature on leading at and across all levels. According to Dandalt's (2024) systematic review, there is still a leader-centric or elitist focus in the existing literature that does not present a holistic understanding of public sector leadership.⁹⁵ Research on individual leaders, and a focus on those in positions of formal authority is limiting in that it **overemphasises the individual nature of leadership**, rather than the collective act of leadership, ignoring large swaths of public service where acts of leadership are occurring at all levels and domains.⁹⁶ As Franken et al (2021) note, the work of the public service is challenging, unique, and profoundly influenced by line managers' leadership skills.⁹⁷ However, many public administration leadership studies situate leadership at the influential top hierarchical levels of organisations,⁹⁸ whereas leadership lower down often has different challenges,⁹⁹ such as implementing human resource management policies and practices. With increasing **devolved decision making**, public leadership does not always correspond directly with organisational positions, often requiring individuals to lead without hierarchical or designated authority.¹⁰⁰ For these reasons (among others), scholars argue that research needs to look at public leaders at and across all levels within public administration (as defined by formal bureaucratic boundaries and across sectors),¹⁰¹ and devolved forms of leadership¹⁰² to better understand the holistic nature of public sector leadership.

2. Digital and virtual leadership

Whilst there is growing research on 'digital era governance', digital and virtual leadership (including e-government, teleworking, digital governance, virtual bureaucracies, etc) appears to be lacking in the literature. Over ten years ago, Van Wart (2013) criticised mainstream leadership studies for poorly integrating the impact of the virtual revolution, described as 'almost completely ignored' outside of the political realm.¹⁰³ More recently, Dandalt (2024) found that virtual leadership still is not integrated in the literature despite the global phenomenon of teleworking throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and with remote work here to stay.¹⁰⁴ This is considered part of a larger shift towards '**digital-era governance**'¹⁰⁵ in which information technologies are at the core of how service provision is structured and how bureaucrats interact with citizens.¹⁰⁶ For example, public organisations in many countries have adopted an electronic

⁹⁵ Dandalt (2024), p.7. See also Kellerman (2008); Bastardo & Van Vugt (2019).

⁹⁶ Getha-Taylor et al (2011), p. 92.

⁹⁷ See Berman et al., (2013); Crosby & Bryson, (2018); Franken et al., (2020); Seidle et al., (2016) as cited in Franken et al (2021), p.633.

⁹⁸ See Tummers & Knies (2016); Wright & Pandey (2010) as cited in Franken et al (2021), p.633.

⁹⁹ See Buick et al. (2018); Knies & Leisink (2014); Pick & Teo (2017) as cited in Franken et al (2021), p.633.

¹⁰⁰ Getha-Taylor et al (2011), p.84.

¹⁰¹ Getha-Taylor et al (2011), p.91; Franken et al (2021).

¹⁰² Franken, E., Plimmer, G., Malinen, S.K., Bryson, J., & Berman, E.M. (2021). Building people up: Growth-oriented leadership in the public sector. *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, 80(4): 661–689, p.633.

¹⁰³ Van Wart (2013), p.537.

¹⁰⁴ See Bloom et al. (2023) as cited in Dandalt (2024), p.7.

¹⁰⁵ Dunleavy, P., H. Margetts, S. Bastow, J., & Tinkler, J. (2006). New Public Management Is Dead—long Live Digital-era Governance. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 16(3): 467–494. doi:10.1093/jopart/mui057.

¹⁰⁶ See Dunleavy et al. (2006); de Boer, N., & Raaphorst, N. (2021). Automation and discretion: explaining the effect of automation on how street-level bureaucrats enforce. *Public Management Review*, 25(1): 42–62. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2021.1937684>

government modality to improve public value,¹⁰⁷ (with some services offered completely online),¹⁰⁸ yet few researchers have addressed the consequences of digitalisation on the interaction between citizens and public leaders.¹⁰⁹ Recent research by Adie et al (2024) found that digital leadership in the public sector demands a unique combination of competencies, skills, knowledge and experience, and public-service-focused strategies.¹¹⁰ For these reasons, there have been calls for scholars in both the fields of leadership and public administration to study the phenomenon of digital and virtual leadership to theorise how public sector leadership operates in virtual bureaucracies.¹¹¹

3. Intersectionality critiques

There are a range of enduring critiques of public sector leadership that are referred to here under the banner of ‘intersectional critiques’. Breslin et al (2017) reviewed 25 years of public leadership scholarship gauge whether and how public administration scholars had interpreted and applied intersectional perspectives to leadership. ‘Intersectionality’ refers to multiple and **simultaneous dimensions of social inequality**, most commonly gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality (although not limited to) that reveal the unique experiences of individuals who occupy multiple marginalised social categories.¹¹² Their analysis found that most of the research relied upon a single dimension of social inequality- gender. As other scholars point out, most public sector leadership studies are underscored by a gender-neutral discourse,¹¹³ reflective of organisational research where male perspectives dominant,¹¹⁴ with calls for further research on women in public sector leadership.¹¹⁵ Regarding the centrality of culture and cultural competency, Campos-Moreira et al (2020) propose a ‘**Culturally Responsive Leadership Framework**’ to improve organisational outcomes. According to their research, culturally responsive leaders are those that tend to seek to understand the socio-cultural, political, and historical context, engage in a distributive leadership style that is inclusive and transformative, and take actions that lead to equity and effectiveness through cultural humility and cultural competence.¹¹⁶ Regarding **equity more broadly**, and in line with Breslin et al (2017) who call for more intersectional leadership analysis, Shen et al (2023) argues that more work is needed about the evolution of equity research and the extent to which it is reflected and enacted in public sector leadership.¹¹⁷

4. Indigenous leadership and Western-dominated critiques

Indigenous leadership is a multi-faceted and complex phenomenon that offers a rich arena for challenging existing leadership paradigms and advancing extant leadership theories.¹¹⁸ Research by Cajete (2016) argues that Western leadership theory and practice is predicated on a Western epistemology, a process of coming to know, that is significantly different to that of an Indigenous relational world.¹¹⁹ Cajete (2016) argues that communal and culturally

¹⁰⁷ Dandalt (2024), p.7.

¹⁰⁸ See Breit & Salomon (2015); Buffat (2015) as cited in de Boer & Raaphorst (2021), p.43.

¹⁰⁹ See Lindgren et al. (2019) as cited in Dandalt (2024), p.7.

¹¹⁰ Adie, B., Tate, M., & Valentine, E. (2024). Digital leadership in the public sector: a scoping review and outlook. *International Review of Public Administration*, 29(1), 42–58. <https://doi.org/10.1080/12294659.2024.2323847>. See also Adie, B. U., Tate, M., Cho, W., & Valentine, E. (2022, July 5-9). Digital leaders and digital leadership: A literature review and research agenda [Proceedings 115]. Pacific Asia Conference on Information Systems, Taipei-Sydney Virtual Conference as cited in Adie et al (2024), p.53.

¹¹¹ Dandalt (2024), p.7.

¹¹² Breslin, R., Pandey, S., & Riccucci, N. (2017). Intersectionality in Public Leadership Research: A Review and Future Research Agenda. *Review of Public Personnel Administration* 37(2): 160-182, p. 160. doi:10.1177/0734371X17697118.

¹¹³ Dandalt (2024), p.4.

¹¹⁴ See Ford (2006); as cited in Dandalt (2024), p.4.

¹¹⁵ Dandalt (2024), p.6.

¹¹⁶ Campos-Moreira, L., Cummings, M., Grumbach, G., Williams, H., & Hooks, K. (2020). Making a Case for Culturally Humble Leadership Practices through a Culturally Responsive Leadership Framework. *Human Service Organizations: Management, Leadership & Governance*, 44(5): 407-414. DOI: 10.1080/23303131.2020.1822974

¹¹⁷ Shen, R., Curley, C., Harrison, N., & Coleman, M. (2023). Where we stand: A review on equity in public administration and policy. *Public Administration Quarterly*, 47(4): 392–428.

¹¹⁸ Wolfgramm, R., Spiller, C., & Voyageur, C. (2016). Special issue: Indigenous leadership – Editors’ introduction. *Leadership*, 12(3): 263-269.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, p.264. Emphasis in original. See Cajete, G. A. (2016). Indigenous education and the development of indigenous community leaders. *Leadership*, 12(3): 364-376.

relevant forms of leadership are what matter most for Indigenous peoples and Indigenous leaders are developed out of a community context of affection, affiliation and education.¹²⁰

Work by Gram-Hanssen (2021) details, as others have, how in many Indigenous cultures, leadership is inherently relational in that it is seen to develop within the context of community, and all phenomena are part of an intricate interrelationship characterised by co-emergence, co-dependence, and reciprocity.¹²¹ More specifically, Gram-Hanssen (2021) argues that Indigenous leadership can help resolve some of the perceived tensions between an individual and a collective view of leadership by providing detailed accounts of exactly how individuals and collectives ‘come to matter through their inseparability and their becoming together’.¹²² Based on an empirical inquiry into leadership in the community of Igiugig in Alaska, four inter-related analytical lenses on Yup’ik culture and leadership are documented: the individual leader, leadership through culture, leadership through process, and leadership through integration.¹²³ The research contributes toward a dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous leadership paradigms and to generate and share knowledge on the relationship between the individual and the collective in leadership. Their analysis enables a view on leadership that is ‘simultaneously individual and collective and shows individuals and collectives as emerging through a process of co-becoming’.¹²⁴

‘Two-eyed seeing’ was introduced by Elder Albert Marshall, a respected Mi’kmaq Elder in Canada as a way of bridging the gap between Indigenous knowledge and Western science.¹²⁵ Wright et al (2019) and others have detailed the benefits of using a ‘two-eyed seeing’ approach in research to create space for Western and Indigenous ways of knowing and being to come together, leveraging the best of both worldviews.¹²⁶ There is some emerging research about ‘two-eyed seeing’ and leadership. In the literature, work by McMillan (2023) has looked at how a ‘two-eyed seeing’ approach to servant leadership is informed by Anishinaabe values (a group of culturally related Indigenous peoples in the Great Lakes region of Canada and the United States). McMillan (2023) found significant connections between the Mishomis teachings and servant leadership in the literature that provide an Indigenous perspective on values-based leadership practices.¹²⁷ McMillan argues this further highlights the need for Indigenous knowledge to support and enhance decolonisation, Indigenisation, and reconciliation efforts within academia,¹²⁸ and raises questions about how ‘new’ past and current Western strands of leadership theory really are. In practice, ‘Edified Projects’ is a certified Indigenous business who practice and advocate the benefits of ‘two-eyed seeing’ for inclusive workplaces by encouraging collaboration and mutual respect between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.¹²⁹ They detail nine principles for ‘two-eyed seeing’ for leaders: 1) respect and value diverse perspectives; 2) seek out multiple viewpoints; 3) embrace uncertainty; 4) practice humility; 5) foster collaboration; 6) promote inclusivity; 7) embrace change; 8) lead with compassion; and 9) commit to lifelong learning.¹³⁰

Of particular relevance to Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, colonial critiques of mainstream **Western dominated leadership** theories and approaches, there appears to be a lack of although slowly growing public sector leadership

¹²⁰ Ibid, p.264.

¹²¹ Cajete (2016) as cited in Gram-Hanssen, I. (2021). Individual and collective leadership for deliberate transformations: Insights from Indigenous leadership. *Leadership*, 17(5): 519-541

¹²² Gram-Hanssen (2021), p. 521.

¹²³ Ibid, p. 521.

¹²⁴ Ibid, p. 521-522. Emphasis in original.

¹²⁵ Bartlett, C., Marshall, M., Marshall, A. (2012). Two-eyed seeing and other lessons learned within a co-learning journey of bringing together indigenous and mainstream knowledges and ways of knowing. *Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences*, 2, 331–340.

¹²⁶ Wright, A. L., Gabel, C., Ballantyne, M., Jack, S. M., & Wahoush, O. (2019). *Using Two-Eyed Seeing in Research with Indigenous People: An Integrative Review*. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 18: 1-19; Althaus, C., & O’Faircheallaigh, C. (2019). *Leading from between: Indigenous participation and leadership in the public service*. McGill-Queen’s University Press; Gram-Hanssen, I. (2021). *Individual and collective leadership for deliberate transformations: Insights from Indigenous leadership*. *Leadership*, 17(5), 519-541. Peltier, C. (2018). An Application of Two-Eyed Seeing: Indigenous Research Methods With Participatory Action Research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 17(1):1-12.

¹²⁷ McMillan, T. (2023). *Anishinaabe Values and Servant Leadership: A Two-Eyed Seeing Approach*. *The Journal of Values-Based Leadership*, 16(1):1-25.

¹²⁸ Ibid, p.1.

¹²⁹ See *Edified Projects*. (n.d). Two-eyed seeing for inclusive leadership.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

scholarship from First Nations perspectives.¹³¹ Research by Althaus & O’Faircheallaigh (2022) focused on **‘Indigenous bureaucratic leadership’** and the challenges faced by and strengths of Indigenous public servants in Australia and Canada. Their research documented the challenges of working in isolation, confronting racism, and challenging policy processes and outcomes to better align with communities, and how many leave the public service or forego career opportunities.¹³² Despite this, Indigenous public servants bring about significant change that otherwise would not occur. Their valuable leadership can bridge understanding between elected officials and communities and respectfully navigating at the intersections of culture and power across the policy making process to the benefit of all citizens, to ‘country’ and across generations.¹³³

Stewart & Warn (2017) document how Indigenous leaders in Australia develop their own distinctive style of leadership, one that is more relationally based, draws on their Indigenous identity and culture as a resource, while negotiating the demands of white Australia.¹³⁴ They suggest that these differences have an important cultural dimension, but also relate to the strategic and tactical challenges of managing **‘two-ways’** (gaining acceptance in communities while learning to operate effectively in non-Indigenous systems of governance) and **‘between two worlds’** (Western organisations and Indigenous communities).¹³⁵ A clear implication of their research is for mainstream organisations to take a much broader and more diverse understanding of leadership practice and the purpose of leadership.¹³⁶

Research by Clark et al (2024) documented the success of Indigenous models of leadership and self-governance in response to COVID-19. Their research provides examples of harnessing Indigenous leadership and self-governance to design and deliver tailored community-based and culturally appropriate COVID-19 vaccination programmes that improved vaccine uptake in Australia (Kimberley region in WA, Maningrida in NT, Hunter New England Region in NSW) and Canada (Fort Albany First Nation in Ontario, Operation remote immunity in Northern Ontario).¹³⁷ According to the authors, in Australia, leadership within Aboriginal health means ‘working as a team and involving people with all experiences, including the community’.¹³⁸ The authors demonstrate and argue that that Indigenous social-governance systems need to be valued, respected, and upheld, especially when it comes to addressing health inequities among Indigenous communities during future pandemics.

In Aotearoa New Zealand Daryn Bean (2018) has documented the **uniqueness of Māori leadership**. According to Bean (2018) Māori leadership practices are designed and constructed through personal models of leadership shaped by Māori values, legacies, *whakapapa* (genealogy), and *whānau* (family) upbringing.¹³⁹ Māori leadership practice has influence beyond the hierarchical structures of *kāwanatanga* (governance). Metaphorically, Māori public servants are *manu kōrero* (literally, knowledge birds) who, given the right conditions, would not operate alone singularly, but operate as many birds, as *manurau* (literally, one hundred birds) and work inside *kāwanatanga* (governance)- empowering and leading others, expressing *rangatiratanga* (sovereignty/ self-determination) from a position of personal integrity, humility, and authority. Bean (2018) found that a key leadership practice of Māori public servants is to position themselves strategically and thoughtfully to advance *mātauranga* Māori and *kaupapa* Māori (being fully human within a Māori world) and are cognisant of the Crown–Māori spaces in which they occupy. Bean (2018) details how they are

¹³¹ See Naquin, V., Manson, S., Curie, C., Sommer, S., Daw, R., Maraku, C., Lallu, N., Meller, D., Willer, C. & Deaux, E. (2008). *Indigenous Evidence-Based Effective Practice Model: Indigenous Leadership in Action*. *International Journal of Leadership in Public Services*, 4(1): 14-24; Clark, K., Crooks, K., Jeyanathan, B., Ahmed, F., Kataquapit, G., Sutherland, C., Tsuji L.J.S., Moriarity, R., Spence, N., Sekercioglu, F., Liberda, E., & Charania, N. (2024). Highlighting models of Indigenous leadership and self-governance for COVID-19 vaccination programmes. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 20(1): 250-258.

¹³² Althaus, C. & O’Faircheallaigh, C. (2022). *Bureaucratic Representation, Accountability, and Democracy: A Qualitative Study of Indigenous Bureaucrats in Australia and Canada*. *Public Administration Review*, 82(4): 646-659.

¹³³ *Ibid*, p. 646.

¹³⁴ Stewart, J. & Warn, J. (2017). *Between Two Worlds: Indigenous Leaders Exercising Influence and Working across Boundaries*. *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, 76(1): 3-17, p.3.

¹³⁵ *Ibid*, p.3.

¹³⁶ *Ibid*, p.15.

¹³⁷ Clark, K., Crooks, K., Jeyanathan, B., Ahmed, F., Kataquapit, G., Sutherland, C., Tsuji, L. J. S., Moriarity, R. J., Spence, N. D., Sekercioglu, F., Liberda, E. N., & Charania, N. A. (2024). Highlighting models of Indigenous leadership and self-governance for COVID-19 vaccination programmes. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 20(1): 250-250, p.250.

¹³⁸ *Ibid*, 252.

¹³⁹ Bean, D. (2018). Bean, Daryn (2018). *Manurau: A conceptual framework of Māori leadership practice in the New Zealand public sector*. PhD Thesis. Te Herenga Waka-Victoria University of Wellington.

careful in their assumptions and views about the underlying forces at play and the responsibility they have in working for government. Bean (2018) details how they are concerned about the legitimate place of *mātauranga* Māori and *kaupapa* Māori in *kāwanatanga* (governance) spaces and work to alleviate and mitigate bureaucratic pressures imposed by the dominant Westminster model of governance.

Ruwhiu & Elkin (2016) illustrate how the study of Indigenous ontologies and practices of leadership contribute to leadership studies. In their examination of the convergence between servant leadership and Indigenous Māori leadership, they argue there is distinction and suggest that a unique system of leadership is derived from cultural criteria bound to the norms, protocols, traditions, kinship systems, economics, politics and social processes that are central to Māori society.¹⁴⁰ According to Ruwhiu & Elkin (2016) Māori leadership is viewed as embodying cultural values of *Te Ao Māori* (the Māori world) suggesting that the Māori conceptions of life energies including *whakapapa* (genealogies), *wairua* (spirituality), *mana* (inherited and endowed authority), *mauri* (life force) and *hau* (reciprocity) influence leadership.¹⁴¹ They highlight how, like servant leadership, these practices are people-oriented and constructed for the care of and wellbeing of people and their organisations.¹⁴² Māori values provide continuity in the transmission of cultural meaning and practices with values that include *manaakitanga* (quality of caring, kindness, hospitality and showing respect for other),¹⁴³ *whanaungatanga* (collective interdependence between and among humankind, reflecting social relationality between people), *wairuatanga* (respecting a spiritual relationship to the gods and the cosmos) and *kaitiakitanga* (acknowledging that humans are guardians of the environment).¹⁴⁴

In part due to the elitist and exclusionary nature of academic publishing,¹⁴⁵ according to Liu & Baker (2014) ‘doing leadership’ is inextricably linked to ‘doing whiteness’¹⁴⁶. Partly as a result, important perspectives can be found largely in grey literature and from relevant grassroots organisations. For example, **in Australia**, according to the **Australian Indigenous Governance Institute (AIGI) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander** leadership has different values and criteria than in wider Australian society where effective leadership tends to be about the **wise use of power**.¹⁴⁷ According to AIGI, culture is at the heart of all effective Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership with cultural leaders playing an integral role in sharing and strengthening cultural knowledge.¹⁴⁸ As such, effective and legitimate, leaders need to: act in a public-spirited way that aligns with shared cultural values and standards of behaviour; be accountable, fair and inclusive in representing all the members of their organisation, community or nation; understand and carry out the responsibilities given to them; inspire people to work together; recognise their weaknesses and strengths; understand the limitations of their role; possess a foundation of cultural and other knowledge; know when to seek further knowledge or expertise, from themselves or others, and help their community, organisation or nation reach its goals.¹⁴⁹ Given the general exclusion and marginalisation of First Nations perspectives of leadership in public sector leadership scholarship, questions remain about how ‘new’ recent calls for more collective, collaborative, relational, and authentic leadership styles really are, considering First Nations peoples have been practicing leadership this way prior to colonisation, and where possible, since.

¹⁴⁰ Wolfgramm et al (2016), p.267. Ruwhiu, D., & Elkin, G. (2016). Converging pathways of contemporary leadership: In the footsteps of Māori and servant leadership. *Leadership*, 12(3): 308-323.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Wolfgramm et al (2016), p.268.

¹⁴⁵ Grydehøj, A., Su, P., Huang, S. and Nadarajah, Y. (2023). Tensions and challenges in the decolonisation of academic publishing: A cross-tabulation analysis of articles in *Island Studies Journal*. *Learned Publishing*, 36: 4-13.

¹⁴⁶ Liu, H., & Baker, C. (2016). White Knights: Leadership as the heroicisation of whiteness. *Leadership*, 12(4): 420-448, p.420.

¹⁴⁷ AIGI. (n.d). *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership*. Indigenous Governance Toolkit.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Smith, D. (2021). Governing as Transformative Leadership, Thematic Introduction: Concepts, Issues and Trends, In *Developing Governance and Governing Development: International Case Studies of Indigenous Futures*, eds. D. Smith, A. Wighton, S. Cornell & A. Vai Delaney. Rowan & Littlefield, p.331 in AIGI. (n.d). *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership*. Indigenous Governance Toolkit.

5. Newer Strands

The extent to which ‘**new strands**’ of leadership are reflected in the literature is another dimension requiring continuous monitoring and nous in deciphering the extent of ‘newness’, its relevance and applicability to the public sector. For example, latest research by Vivona (2024) calls for the integration of entrepreneurial leadership. Broadly speaking, entrepreneurial leadership is founded on seven key factors, namely the traits of 1) bootstrapping, 2) persistence, 3) vision of the future, and the ability to influence, 4) creativity, 5) innovativeness, 6) passion, and 7) risk-taking.¹⁵⁰ Research in the Australian public sector found that ‘**entrepreneurial leaders**’ influence the effectiveness of public sector organisations and the ability to achieve their goals, while also enacting in their agencies a democratic organisational culture where staff are consulted and participate openly in the policy decision-making process.¹⁵¹ As such Vivona (2024) argues that entrepreneurial leadership theory has the potential to benefit public sector leadership, enabling public sectors to better deal with grand challenges and sustain mission-oriented innovations,¹⁵² recently popularised by the work of Mariana Mazzucato¹⁵³ among others.

There has been a growing interest in the emerging field of social cognitive neuroscience and leadership. Organisational cognitive neuroscience and *neuroleadership* are newly established interdisciplinary fields that use neuroscientific techniques to answer questions about behaviours within organisations and aim to discover screening tools for good leaders, to improve leadership skills, and to identify unconscious factors affecting behaviour in hopes of improving management and leadership practices.¹⁵⁴ Proponents argue that it can produce better-informed theories and leadership patterns by investigating the neurological basis of behaviour such as emotional regulation, ethical reasoning and decision-making.¹⁵⁵ According to Pittman (2020) neuroscience-informed approaches can assist with leaders aligning their leadership and further their ability to cultivate positive organisational environments.¹⁵⁶ Rodriguez et al (2023) propose that neuroleadership is a new way for ‘happiness management’ to enable better workplaces.¹⁵⁷ Kuhlmann & Kadgien (2018) caution that although proponents of neuroleadership are optimistic, brain and interpersonal behaviours are complex and context dependant and warn against applying findings from the field ‘prematurely and with blind optimism’.¹⁵⁸

Another emerging strand relates to **creativity**. According to Loewenberger, Newton & Wick (2014), creativity and innovation are essential to adding value in challenging dynamic environments such as the public sector, yet capability and commitment are frequently lacking in practice.¹⁵⁹ Recent research by Houtgraaf (2023) revealed the ‘pragmatic nature of public sector creativity’ that is focused on keeping things running and tends to be incremental, practical and reactive¹⁶⁰. It also found that greater managerial freedom can be more conducive to sparking creativity and that work pressures, lack of social contact and inspiration inhibit creativity¹⁶¹. Further work by Houtgraaf, Kruijen & Thiel (2024) found that creative public servants may be more prone to rule-bending, but that the justification and public value

¹⁵⁰ See Renko et al. (2015) as cited in Vivona (2024), p.1568.

¹⁵¹ Vivona (2024), p.1567.

¹⁵² See Hayter, Link, & Scott (2018 as cited in Vivona (2024), p.1567; Mazzucato, M. (2018). *The entrepreneurial state*. Penguin Books, London.

¹⁵³ Mazzucato (2018); Mazzucato, M. (2022). *Mission economy: A moonshot guide to changing capitalism*. Penguin Books, London.

¹⁵⁴ Kuhlmann, N., & Kadgien, CA. (2018). Neuroleadership: Themes and limitations of an emerging interdisciplinary field. *Healthcare Management Forum*, 31(3):103-107, p.103.

¹⁵⁵ Waldman, D., Balhazard P., & Peterson S. (2011). Social cognitive neuroscience and leadership. *Leadership Quarterly*,22(6):10921106.

¹⁵⁶ Pittman, A. (2020). Leadership Rebooted: Cultivating Trust with the Brain in Mind. *Human Service Organizations: Management, Leadership & Governance*, 44(2): 127–143.

¹⁵⁷ Ruiz-Rodríguez, R., Ortiz-de-Urbina-Criado, M., & Ravina-Ripoll, R. (2023). Neuroleadership: a new way for happiness management. *Humanities Social Science Communication*, 10(139): 1-14.

¹⁵⁸ Kuhlmann & Kadgien (2018), p.103.

¹⁵⁹ Loewenberger, P., Newton, M. & Wick, K. (2014). Developing creative leadership in a public sector organisation. *International Journal of Public Sector Management*, 27(3): 190-200. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJPSM-11-2012-0152>; Salaman & Storey (2002) as cited in Loewenberger, Newton & Wick (2014), p.191.

¹⁶⁰ Houtgraaf, G. (2023). Public sector creativity: triggers, practices and ideas for public sector innovations. A longitudinal digital diary study, *Public Management Review*, 25(8): 1610-1631. 10.1080/14719037.2022.2037015, p.1610.

¹⁶¹ ANZSOG. (2022). Is the public sector creative? April 20th. <https://anzsog.edu.au/research-insights-and-resources/research/is-the-public-sector-creative/>

judgement for doing so matters (for example, self-interest vs public good).¹⁶² ‘Creative bureaucracy’ is having an impact in practice such as the ‘Creative Bureaucracy Festival’ with an annual global awards process, over 100 global partners, with the ‘to refresh the reputation of public administrations and appeal to imaginative new talent’.¹⁶³

Another emerging area is **leading social transformations**. Bryson et al (2021) argue that leading a social transformation requires changes that are multi-issue, multi-level, multi-organisational, cross- sectoral and can cross national frontiers.¹⁶⁴ This requires leadership that is deeply relational, visionary, political, adaptive, and comfortable with complexity- in conjunction with what they describe as strategic leadership, leading collaborations, coalition building, and advocacy.¹⁶⁵ Unlike the predominant leader-follower ontology of leadership, their research is guided by an ontology developed by Drath et al (2008).¹⁶⁶ It asserts that leadership is about achieving **direction, alignment and commitment** (referred to as DAC) which Bryson et al (2021) argue is necessary when the context shifts beyond single organisations to include collaborations and social movements. This emerging work is found in change management and leadership studies literature but may be increasingly relevant to more mission led oriented public sector practice.

¹⁶² Houtgraaf, G., Kruijven, P., & Thiel, S. (2024): A connotation to public sector creativity: creative public servants’ tendencies to opt for rulebending, *Public Management Review*, DOI: 10.1080/14719037.2024.2351464

¹⁶³ Creative Bureaucracy Festival. (n.d). About us. Accessed 5/9/24. <https://creativebureaucracy.org/about/>

¹⁶⁴ Bryson, J., Barberg, B., Crosby, B., & Patton, M. (2021). Leading Social Transformations: Creating Public Value and Advancing the Common Good. *Journal of Change Management*, 21(2), 180–202. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14697017.2021.1917492>, p.180.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ See Drath, W., McCauley, C., Paulus, C., Van Velsor, E., O’Connor, P., & McGuire, J. (2008). Direction, alignment, commitment: Toward a more integrative ontology of leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 19(6): 635–653. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2008.09.003> as cited in Bryson et al (2021), p.182.

Where To Next?

We know that public sector leadership is distinct¹⁶⁷ and that leadership development is hard to get right, although not insurmountable.¹⁶⁸ We know that the landscape of leadership offerings and strands of approaches appears to be ever expanding, often driven by marketing forces rather than a sound evidence base of impact into practice, with more attention and research required about the appropriateness of approaches that are attuned to context and areas currently overlooked or missing.

As this analysis has shown, leadership theories and development approaches **are shifting and changing all the time**—often with a **disjuncture between theory and practice**. Ways of working that continually enable the genuine connection and collaboration between theory and practice are needed for the benefit of both and to ultimately achieve better public sector leadership and outcomes for communities and citizens.

¹⁶⁷ Carson, L., & Richardson, J. (2025). [Does public sector leadership differ?](#) ANZSOG Research Insights, No.40. 10.54810/FLWT3879

¹⁶⁸ Carson, L., & Richardson, J. (2025). [Why is leadership development hard to get right?](#) Research Insights. Series, No. 52. Australia & New Zealand School of Government. 10.54810/RQPR5261

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