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Why is leadership  
development hard to  
get right?

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# Why is leadership development hard to get right?



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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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## CONTENTS

<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>WHY LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT IS HARD TO GET RIGHT? .....</b>	<b>5</b>
What do we mean by leadership development? .....	5
1. Complexities of leadership research .....	5
2. Different strands of leadership theory and styles .....	8
TABLE 1: Leadership theories and styles .....	9
TABLE 2: Strategies for defeating zombie leadership.....	11
3. Lag between theory, practice and peer review .....	12
4. Limited data on leadership development and impact.....	12
5. Who and how 'effectiveness' is defined?.....	13
TABLE 3: Schema for contextualising leadership research .....	14
6. Underestimating how much context matters .....	14
TABLE 4: Context factors relevant to leadership development research .....	15
<b>WHERE TO NEXT?.....</b>	<b>15</b>

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There are multiple reasons why leadership development is hard to get right. This paper provides a high-level overview and synthesis of six main factors based on a review of relevant academic literature. Given the elitist and exclusionary history and nature of academic publishing<sup>1</sup>, it is important to note at the outset that the following is predominantly based on western academic literature and thus not representative on non-western leadership development.

### What do we mean by leadership development?

Whilst a vast amount of literature exists on leadership theories, far less is known about leadership development theories, with the distinction between both often left unstated or conflated. Generally, **leadership theories** focus on *what* and *why* leadership happens (e.g. what it does, what it looks like in organisations, what organisations do to affect it, why it matters, its outcomes, etc.), whereas **leadership development** focuses on *how* to help people become better leaders, and how to help organisations develop better leadership throughout their organisation.<sup>2</sup>

### Why is leadership development hard to get right?

This paper identifies six main factors regarding why leadership development for the public sector is hard to get right. This is not an exhaustive list, rather a high-level synthesis based on a thematic review of literature across multiple disciplines. The six main factors summarised for succinctness include (although not limited to):

1	Complexities of leadership research
2	Expanding strands of leadership theory and practice
3	Lag between theory and practice (and vice versa)
4	Limited data on leadership development and impact
5	Who and how 'effectiveness' is defined
6	Underestimating how much context matters

### Why does this matter?

Leader development remains under-theorised and contested, particularly public sector leader development. Despite recent tentative steps toward more comprehensive theories of leader and leadership development,<sup>3</sup> however the majority of efforts remain typically rooted within a general approach to leader development based upon a private sector context. Issues particular to the public sector do not appear to be as closely attended to.<sup>4</sup>

### What's needed next?

What the 'right' type, style or theory of leadership for the public sector and how it can or should be developed is both unclear and contested. In the absence of definitive 'one size fits all' approach, **raising awareness** about some of the main factors can help inform public sector decision making about leadership development. **Further research** specific to the public sector, especially regarding more comprehensive theoretical frameworks and longitudinal research on impact is needed. Whilst many public sectors rely on capability frameworks, questions remain about how they are actually used in practice, their utility and how to better track alignment and impact over time. Ensuring any leadership development approach is **attuned to context** and informed by a sound **theory of change with indicators** to continually track and ensure alignment is a sound place to start. The task of getting leadership development right for the public sector is not insurmountable, rather requires awareness of factors and steps taken to ensure approaches are fit for purpose to achieve positive impact in practice.

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> Marcy (2023), p.263.

<sup>3</sup> See Day (2000); Day et al., (2009); Lord & Hall, (2005); Mumford & Manley (2003); Pinnington (2011); Wallace et al., (2021) as cited in Marcy (2023), p.264.

<sup>4</sup> Cote (2007) as cited in Marcy (2023), p.264

## WHY LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT IS HARD TO GET RIGHT?

This paper provides a high-level synthesis about why leadership development is hard to get right. It begins by contextualising what 'leadership development' means, followed by a high level synthesis about the complexities of leadership development based on the literature. Given the elitist and exclusionary history and nature of academic publishing,<sup>5</sup> it is important to note that the following is predominantly based on western academic literature and thus not representative on non-western leadership development.

### What do we mean by leadership development?

Whilst a vast amount of literature exists on leadership theories, there is less and significant gaps in leadership development theories<sup>6</sup> and impact into practice.<sup>7</sup> The definitions and distinctions between leadership theories and leader development theories are sometimes left unstated or often conflated.

Generally, **leadership theories** focus on *what* and perhaps *why* leadership happens (e.g. what it does, what it looks like in organisations, what organisations do to affect it, why it might be important, its outcomes, etc.), whereas **leadership development** focuses on *how* to help people become better leaders, and how to help organisations develop better leadership throughout their organisation.<sup>8</sup>

According to Marcy (2023), up until recently, few established theories of leader development existed, let alone theories of public sector leader development.<sup>9</sup> Some scholars have begun to take some tentative steps toward more comprehensive theories of leader and leadership development,<sup>10</sup> however the vast majority of these efforts remain typically rooted within a general approach to leader development (which also often means, private sector), suggesting that issues particular to the public sector may not be as closely attended to as others.<sup>11</sup>

### SIX KEY FACTORS

The remainder of this paper details six main factors regarding why leadership development for the public sector is hard to get right. This is not an exhaustive list, rather a high-level synthesis based on a literature scan. The six main factors summarised for succinctness include (although not limited to):

1	Complexities of leadership research
2	Expanding strands of leadership theory and practice
3	Lag between theory and practice (and vice versa)
4	Limited data on leadership development and impact
5	Who and how 'effectiveness' is defined
6	Underestimating how much context matters

### 1. Complexities of leadership research

One of the main contributing factors why leadership development is hard to get right is due to the complexities of leadership research. Notable complexities include the growth in leadership, outcomes, methodologies, publication bias, construct proliferation and redundancy, as well as business considerations. Each is briefly outlined below.

<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> With some notable exceptions Blanchard & Donahue (2008); Ingraham & Getha-Taylor (2004); McGurk (2009); Pinnington (2011) as cited in Marcy (2023), p. 263.

<sup>7</sup> Carson, L., & Given, L. M. (2021). The societal impact puzzle: a snapshot of a changing landscape across education and research. *Policy Design and Practice*, 4(3), 323-340. <https://doi.org/10.1080/25741292.2021.194625>. Althaus, C., Carson, L., Sullivan, H., & van Wanrooy, B. (2021). Research and education in public sector practice: a systems approach to understanding policy impact. *Policy Design and Practice*, 4(3), 309-322. <https://doi.org/10.1080/25741292.2021.1977478>

<sup>8</sup> Marcy (2023), p.263.

<sup>9</sup> Blanchard & Donahue (2008); Day et al., (2009) in Marcy (2023), p.264.

<sup>10</sup> See Day (2000); Day et al., (2009); Lord & Hall, (2005); Mumford & Manley (2003); Pinnington (2011); Wallace et al., (2021) as cited in Marcy (2023), p.264.

<sup>11</sup> Cote (2007) as cited in Marcy (2023), p.264

- *Growth in leadership research*

There is an ever-growing body of research on leadership, most of which is focused on the private sector and to a lesser extent, on public sector leadership. Although there is a growing body of research on public sector leadership, there are limits about what can be learnt from single studies for both researchers and practitioners, given the variety of styles, outcomes, contexts, and methods used.<sup>12</sup>

- *Outcome complexities*

Another complexity relates to the outcomes of leadership, especially when attempting to gauge 'effectiveness'. This plays out in five main ways. First, the existence of research on effectiveness depends on how and what outcomes can be measured. Many if not most studies in the field relate leadership styles to various outcome variables that are deemed 'measurable' and thus considered cornerstones of 'effectiveness'.<sup>13</sup> An example of this is the association between leadership styles and job satisfaction which is among the best-researched attitudes of public employees.<sup>14</sup>

Second, is the difficulty of comparing different leadership styles on particular outcomes and vice versa. For example, most studies in the field focus on the implications of leadership on attitudes, motivations, and behaviours of employees<sup>15</sup> and leadership outcomes may also relate to jobs, such as perceptions of job autonomy<sup>16</sup> or to managerial practices, such as the use of performance information.<sup>17</sup> Scholars and practitioners are often even more interested in the consequences of leadership at collective levels, such as group climate,<sup>18</sup> organisational performance,<sup>19</sup> or societal impact<sup>20</sup> that are less proximal and more distal outcomes of leadership, making it unclear whether leadership yields the same effects across all these types of outcomes, and how leadership styles differ in this regard.<sup>21</sup>

Third, leadership outcomes also vary in terms of desirability. Scholars and practitioners usually consider leadership effective when it facilitates beneficial outcomes (such as outstanding performance) but inhibits detrimental outcomes (such as unethical behaviour), but the underlying social-psychological mechanisms through which leadership yields these effects may be very different.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, implications of leadership in general and the various leadership styles in particular are also likely to differ depending on the valence of outcome variables (such as beneficial or detrimental),<sup>23</sup> noting there is only a small amount of research on the latter (e.g. destructive leadership).<sup>24</sup>

The fourth reason relates to the complexity of tacit knowledge. Given leadership skills require tacit knowledge – which is hard or even impossible to articulate to others<sup>25</sup> including researchers, this creates limits to how far researchers can understand leadership if they are not situationally and contextually involved.<sup>26</sup>

The fifth reason related to temporal dimensions and considerations with some scholars arguing that time is a missing variable when trying to evaluate the impact of leadership.<sup>27</sup> Most literature focuses on a particular point in time, with limited longitudinal studies which is problematic for trying to understand the effect of leadership development and perceptions of leadership.<sup>28</sup>

- *Methodological complexities*

<sup>12</sup> Backhaus & Vogel (2022), p.987; Dinh, J., Lord, R., Gardner, W., Meuser, J., Liden, R., & Hu, J. (2014). *Leadership Theory and Research in the New Millennium: Current Theoretical Trends and Changing Perspectives*. *The Leadership Quarterly* 25: 36–62, p.56.

<sup>13</sup> Vogel & Masal, (2015).

<sup>14</sup> See Backhaus & Vogel (2022), p.988; Cantarelli et al., (2016).

<sup>15</sup> See for example, Hassan, Park, & Raadschelders (2019); Miao et al., (2018); Wright et al., (2012).

<sup>16</sup> See Tummers et al., (2018).

<sup>17</sup> See Masal & Vogel, (2016).

<sup>18</sup> See Hassan et al., (2014).

<sup>19</sup> See Jacobsen & Andersen (2015).

<sup>20</sup> See Luu, (2018b).

<sup>21</sup> Backhaus & Vogel (2022), p.988.

<sup>22</sup> Backhaus & Vogel (2022), p.989.

<sup>23</sup> Backhaus & Vogel (2022), p.989.

<sup>24</sup> See Schyns, B., & Schilling, J. (2013). How bad are the effects of bad leaders? A meta-analysis of destructive leadership and its outcomes. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 24(1): 138-158.

<sup>25</sup> See Tsoukas & Vladimirou (2001) as cited in Hartley (2018), p.212.

<sup>26</sup> Hartley (2018), p. 212.

<sup>27</sup> See Gordon, A., & Yukl, G. (2004). The future of leadership research: Challenges and opportunities. *Zeitschrift für Personalforschung*, 18:359–65.

<sup>28</sup> Getha-Taylor et al (2011), p.93.

There is considerable variation *how* research on public sector leadership is carried out. This includes ever-expanding methodological designs and combinations, impacting the type of result and claims that can be made.<sup>29</sup> How methodological factors interfere with the association between leadership and outcomes, has not yet been assessed on a broad scale in the literature.<sup>30</sup> When designing and analysing results, several questions need to be considered such as (although not limited to):

- What research design to use? (predominantly cross-sectional designs, with the independent and dependent variables being measured at the same point in time, noting a lack of longitudinal studies)
- Which method/s to use? (predominantly surveys, questionnaires, but with increasing awareness of needing to guard against common method bias)
- What variables to measure? (whilst guarding against common source bias)<sup>31</sup>
- When to measure? (noting complexities of re-active vs pro-active research,<sup>32</sup> with most research retrospective to emphasise so called 'success' stories)<sup>33</sup>
- Choice and combination of data sources? (e.g. perception measures vs more objective measures)
- Who to ask? (e.g. complexities of self vs other ratings, noting the tendency for self-assessments to overestimate behaviours compared to employee assessments).<sup>34</sup>
- *Publication bias*

Publication bias plays out in four main ways. First there is publication bias regarding what type of research is pursued, by who, when and for what reasons. For example, there is often a positive bias to publish 'good', rather than 'bad' or negative results.<sup>35</sup> Second, journals have a publication bias about what type and style of research they publish with some having methodological preferences (such as qualitative/quantitative) and different thresholds of what appropriate sample sizes (small vs large sample sizes). Third, universities have a publication bias about what outlets academics and partners should aim to publish in with career advancement often heavily influenced by implicit and explicit institutional preferences (e.g. incentivised to publish in top tier journals for promotion). Fourth, there is a plethora of data that does not make it to or into peer-reviewed research, instead held internally by educational and training providers. Some may be shared anecdotally, or with other sectors such as government and consultancies, or in grey literature, but does not tend to be used to inform peer-reviewed research.

- *Construct proliferation and empirical redundancy*

There is a growing diversity of leadership definitions, theories, models and styles, many of which lack a body of quality empirical studies to be able to meaningfully compare to assess 'effectiveness'.<sup>36</sup> For example, Van Wart (2013) has highlighted how such growing variety has led to 'Balkanization of the field with innumerable aspects of leadership, each with its own special and often conflicting terms'.<sup>37</sup>

'Construct proliferation' refers to the abundance of models with different names that tap into the same idea in the field of leadership.<sup>38</sup> In practice, scholars increasingly face the issue of how the various leadership styles relate to and are distinct from each other in terms of both conceptualisation and measurement.<sup>39</sup> According to Le et al (2010) when a field proposes several new theoretically distinct constructs to describe a similar idea, there is greater risk of 'construct empirical redundancy' whereby constructs may be highly related, may share similar patterns of relationships with other variables, making it harder to distinguish between constructs and their unique roles within a conceptual network.<sup>40</sup> Construct proliferation may lead to confusion for human resource development (HRD) professionals about what model to use in their leadership development programmes, which can result in significant spending in unprofitable and ineffective directions, especially problematic in times of tightening L&D funding.<sup>41</sup> Thus, there is a need for

<sup>29</sup> Backhaus & Vogel (2022).

<sup>30</sup> Backhaus & Vogel (2022), p.987.

<sup>31</sup> For example, self-reported measures from the same source may inflate results as raised by George & Pandey (2017); Jakobsen & Jensen (2015); Meier & O'Toole (2013).

<sup>32</sup> See Hartley (2018), p.212.

<sup>33</sup> Getha-Taylor et al (2011), p.93.

<sup>34</sup> See Jakobsen & Andersen (2015); Vogel & Kroll (2019).

<sup>35</sup> See Backhaus & Vogel (2022), p.993.

<sup>36</sup> Deng et al (2024)

<sup>37</sup> Van Wart (2013) p. 537.

<sup>38</sup> See Le et al. (2010); Bormann & Rowold (2018).

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Backhaus & Vogel (2022).

<sup>41</sup> Backhaus & Vogel (2022), p.988

more evidence-based research, clarity and arguably pragmatism about the distinctions, effectiveness and limitations of different approaches to help avoid leadership ‘fads’.

- *Business & marketing complexities*

The business of leadership development is difficult to ascertain with one estimate in 2019 that \$3.5 billion USD was spent globally on leadership development initiatives.<sup>42</sup> In 2023, it was estimated that global organisations spent \$60+ billion on leadership development programs.<sup>43</sup> The billion-dollar industry aspect needs to be considered in the context of incentives for proponents of particular approaches to influence or invest in positive peer reviewed research that has marketing, reputation and financial benefits for their private interests.

## 2. Different strands of leadership theory and styles

The number of leadership strands continues to expand. Terms such as ‘theory’, ‘school’, ‘approach’, ‘style’, and ‘model’ (among others) are often used interchangeably with the distinctions between each unclear in the literature. For example, according to Van Wart (2013) a leadership **style** is generally considered a mid-range conceptualisation of recognisable patterns of leader characteristics and behaviours.<sup>44</sup> This tends to be a popular device in academic literature because of the ability to divide leadership up into to a dozen or so elements, depending on the taxonomy used.<sup>45</sup>

Table 1 below details some of the main contemporary leadership strands based on a recent literature scan, noting ‘how contemporary’ is less clear and contested. As scholars point out, these are very likely to have aspects in common, but arguably also vary in the source, object, and result.<sup>46</sup> Some scholars have tried to categorise different styles into theoretical trends to help synthesise the field, although the number and distinctions between each is not always clear and contested.<sup>47</sup> For example, Van Wart (2013) argued there were five main approaches at the time: traditional, transactional, transformational, collaborative, and ethical. A more recent systematic review by Dandalt (2024) argues there are six main leader-centric research trends: administrative, political, ethical, servant, organisational and effective.<sup>48</sup>

Theoretical approaches to leadership generally fall into one of two categories: descriptive or normative.<sup>49</sup> However, it is not always clear which ones are descriptive (describing *how* leaders act) versus normative (how leaders *ought* to act) based on moral principles and social norms.<sup>50</sup> Many are also informed by different disciplinary paradigms such as constructivist, behaviorist, postmodern, post- constructionists etc with fault lines largely between constructivist and behaviouralist.

A **constructivist approach** to leadership views leadership not as a fixed individual trait but as a socially constructed, reciprocal process where understanding and meaning are built through dialogue and shared experiences within a community. Constructivist theories of leadership emphasise new and integrative approaches to leadership development, effectiveness, and evaluation. The resulting research is focused on how leaders see their roles, how they derive meaning from their work, and how they assess their own development.<sup>51</sup>

A **behavioural approach** to leadership posits that effective leadership stems from specific, observable behaviours rather than inherent traits, suggesting that leaders are made through training and practice. Key theories, like those from Ohio State University and the University of Michigan, identified two main types of behaviours: *task behaviours* and *relationship behaviours*.<sup>52</sup> Task behaviours facilitate goal accomplishment helping group members to achieve their objectives.<sup>53</sup> Relationship behaviours help followers feel comfortable with themselves, with each other, and with the situation in which they find themselves.<sup>54</sup> The central purpose of the behavioural approach is to explain how leaders combine these two kinds of

<sup>42</sup> See Training Industry (2019) as cited in Deng et al (2022), p.628.

<sup>43</sup> Yemiscigil, A., Born, D., & Ling, H. (2023). *What makes leadership development programs succeed?* *Harvard Business Review*, February 28.

<sup>44</sup> Van Wart (2013), p. 531.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Backhaus & Vogel (2022); Ospina (2017).

<sup>47</sup> See Van Wart (2013)

<sup>48</sup> Dandalt (2024), p. 4.

<sup>49</sup> Johnson, C. E. (2013). Normative leadership theories (Chapter 7) in *Meeting the Ethical Challenges of Leadership*, Sage Publications. p.229.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, p.229.

<sup>51</sup> Johnston, L.M. (2018). Constructivist Theories of Leadership. In: Farazmand, A. (eds) *Global Encyclopedia of Public Administration, Public Policy, and Governance*. Springer.

<sup>52</sup> Johnson, C. E. (2013). Behavioural approach (Chapter 4) in *Meeting the Ethical Challenges of Leadership*, Sage Publications. p.71.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

behaviours to influence followers in their efforts to reach a goal.<sup>55</sup> This approach emphasises that leadership skills can be learned and cultivated, providing a framework for leadership training programs focused on developing these actionable behaviours.

**TABLE 1: Leadership theories and styles<sup>56</sup>**

Style	Description	Notes	Key source	
1	Adaptive leadership	Based on the premise that leadership is an act, not a position and a practice for helping mobilise members of an organisation or community to adapt to significant change by creating the circumstances for good leadership and problem solving.	Introduced by Ronald Heifetz, founding Director of the Center for Public Leadership at the Harvard Kennedy School, marketed as a 'practical leadership framework' having grown out of their 30 plus years of examining and teaching the practice of leadership at Harvard University.	<a href="#">Hall et al (2024)</a>
2	Administrative leadership	Tends to focus on people (at all levels) and the accompanying processes and networks that lead, manage, and guide government and non-profit agencies.	Generally, focuses on civil service and appointed leaders rather than political leaders, and focuses primarily, but not exclusively, on implementation and the technical aspects.	<a href="#">Van Wart (2013)</a>
3	Authentic leadership	Tends to focus on self-awareness, consistent behaviours, and transparent relations with followers. Takes the position that being a successful leader is to be yourself, and that great leadership starts with authenticity, which then strengthens one's ability to hone their other leadership skills.	Introduced by Bill George in his 2003 book 'Authentic Leadership: Rediscovering the Secrets to Creating Lasting Value'.	<a href="#">Yemiscigil, Born, Snook &amp; Pate (2022)</a>
4	Collaborative leadership	Tends to emphasize bringing diverse stakeholders together (within and across sectors) in a 'collaborative spirit' to foster cooperation and shared goals.	According to some scholars, considered the most popular and dynamic leadership theory because of its connection to collaborative or network governance studies.	<a href="#">Hsieh &amp; Liou (2018)</a>
5	Collective leadership	Tends to focus on how leadership is enabled and emerges horizontally with a focus on communication, network development and leader team exchange. The result of leadership is the <i>capacity generated</i> to effectively collaborate and produce results together.	It can be considered a 'meta category' that other theories fit within, contribute to, or overlap (such as collaborative, shared/distributed, relational, etc)	<a href="#">Ospina (2017)</a>
6	Culturally responsive leadership	Culturally responsive leaders 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.	Draws on systems theory, organisational change, cultural humility and cultural competence literature. A lot of this work comes from Education scholarship.	<a href="#">Campos-Moreira et al (2020)</a>
7	Digital leadership	Tends to focus on developing leaders who need a balanced mix of expertise in technology, business, and soft skills.	Typically informed by transformational, transactional, visionary, and charismatic leadership, yet those do not completely encapsulate digital leadership.	<a href="#">Adie, Tate &amp; Valentine (2024)</a>

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Please note, the following Table is not an exhaustive list, rather those repeatedly identified in literature during the development of this paper. A deliberate attempt has been made here to limit the number to around 20 in alphabetical order.

8	Entrepreneurial leadership	Leadership style that aims to achieve organisational goals by inspiring subordinates to identify, explore, and exploit opportunities.	Tends to combine aspects of entrepreneurship, leadership and strategy.	<a href="#">Vivona (2024)</a>
9	Ethical leadership	Focuses on the ethical dimensions of leadership. Tends to promote integrity and leading through service and sacrifice which leaders can demonstrate through their actions and promote <sup>57</sup> .	Research shows that an ethical culture has an influence on the extent of ethical leadership and vice versa and that taking an 'integrity-based approach' has benefits for innovation.	<a href="#">Van der Wal &amp; Demircioglu (2020)</a>
10	First Nations leadership	Focuses on leading in different ways to that of mainstream approaches with attention to relationality, culture, place, stewardship and leading in 'wise' ways attuned to community and kinship among other dimensions.	Underrepresented in mainstream leadership and public sector leadership literature despite a necessary and growing interest in practice.	Gram-Hansen (2021) Bean (2018) <a href="#">Althaus &amp; O'Faircheallaigh (2022)</a>
11	Growth oriented leadership	Focuses on the behaviours by line managers to actively build employee capability to better adapt to changes and pressures in public institutions.	Considered to have potential as an alternative approach to raise public sector capability.	<a href="#">Franken et al (2021)</a>
12	Integrative leadership	Tends to focus on bringing diverse groups and organisations together in semi-permanent ways, typically across sectors to address complex public problems and create public value.	Considered to be broader than administrative leadership in that it focuses on multiple sectors, but narrower in that some topics related to internal operations and management are largely ignored.	<a href="#">Crosby &amp; Bryson (2010)</a>
13	Leader-member Exchange (LMX) theory	The dyadic exchange relationship between a leader and a member (follower) whereby the quality of the relationship determines the effectiveness of leadership.	High-quality LMX relationships are anticipated to yield high levels of mutual trust, support, and obligation with low-quality relationships more instrumental and less effective <sup>58</sup> .	<a href="#">Trummers &amp; Knies (2013)</a>
14	Paradoxical leadership	Focuses on the ability to navigate organisational paradoxes who in turn are anticipated to be more effective in leading people in complex, ambiguous, and contradictory work environments.	Coincides with a broader trend towards more complexity, ambiguity, and volatility in the public sector and society. Recent research shows it positively influences followers' job satisfaction and work engagement.	<a href="#">Backhaus et al (2022)</a>
15	Relational leadership	Tends to focus the relational nature of leadership with two key perspectives: an <i>entity</i> perspective that focuses on identifying attributes of individuals as they engage in interpersonal relationships, and a <i>relational</i> perspective that views leadership as a process of social construction through which certain understandings of leadership come about.	Emphasises the importance of collective dimensions of leadership with a focus on how processes of leadership emerge in organisational and social settings.	<a href="#">Orr &amp; Bennett (2016)</a>
16	Servant Leadership	Tends to focus on engaging followers in multiple dimensions and develop followers on the basis of leaders' altruistic and ethical orientations.	Servant leaders tend to see themselves as stewards of their organisations; includes performance expectations but emphasises personal development of their followers.	<a href="#">Eva et al (2019)</a>

<sup>57</sup> Brown, M. E., Treviño, L. K., & Harrison, D. A. (2005). Ethical leadership: A social learning perspective for construct development and testing. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 97(2): 117-134, p.120.

<sup>58</sup> See Ospina (2017); Graen & Uhl-Bien (1995); Uhl-Bien, Maslyn, & Ospina (2012).

17	Shared/ Distributed leadership	Tends to focus on the source of leadership as the 'leadership role'. The object of the work of leadership tends to be the group and individuals taking up roles with the end result being shared responsibility for joint work. <sup>59</sup>	Shared and distributed leadership theories move toward a more systems-centred approach <sup>60</sup> and tend to focus on how leadership is shared and distributed at a team/ group level.	<u>Zeier, Plimmer &amp; Franken (2021)</u>
18	Systems leadership	Tends to focus on coordination, collaboration and change in complex multi-stakeholder environments as an approach to leading and influencing across organisational and sector boundaries.	Builds on earlier conceptualisations of shared, distributed and collective leadership.	<u>Bolden, Gulati &amp; Edwards (2020)</u>
19	Transactional leadership	Tends to focus on leadership as an exchange relationship between leaders and followers that motivates, and guides subordinates towards goals by clarifying tasks and providing contingent rewards and sanctions.	Generally considered no longer relevant although Nguyen et al (2022), argue it can be effective when enriched with public values. <sup>61</sup>	<u>Nguyen et al (2022)</u>
20	Transformational leadership	Tends to focus on facilitating changes in the mission, vision, value, and culture.	Considered to be the most widely discussed style of leadership, both in PA scholarship and beyond.	<u>Deng et al (2023)</u>
<b>Sources:</b> In addition to those listed in the 'Key source' column, cross referenced using Ospina (2017); a systematic review by <u>Dandalt (2024)</u> ; and a meta-analysis by <u>Backhaus &amp; Vogel (2022)</u> .				

In light of the ever expanding strands and approaches to leadership, Haslam et al (2024) argues that we are in a time of '**zombie leadership**' where dead ideas still walk among us.<sup>62</sup> They argue that these ideas live on not because of empirical support but rather because of their appeal to elites, as part of the '**leadership industrial complex**' that supports them, and 'propagated' in everyday discourse in the media, popular books, consultants, HR practices, policy makers, and academics who are 'adept at catering to the tastes of the powerful and telling them what they want to hear'.<sup>63</sup> They detail eight core claims (axioms) of zombie leadership: (1) leadership is all about leaders; (2) there are specific qualities that all great leaders 'have'; (3) there are specific things that all great leaders do; (4) we all know a great leader when we see one; (5) all leadership is the same; (6) leadership is a special skill limited to special people; (7) leadership is always good and it is always good for everyone; and (8) people can't cope without leaders.<sup>64</sup> Haslam et al (2024) recommend four key strategies for defeating and guarding against zombie leadership detailed in Table 2 below.<sup>65</sup>

**TABLE 2: Strategies for defeating zombie leadership**

1	Recognising the components of zombie leadership	<p><i>Four key claims</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Only leaders can lead</li> <li>2. Leaders have qualities that set them apart from ordinary people</li> <li>3. Group success should be attributed to leaders</li> <li>4. History is ultimately the story of great leaders</li> </ol>
2	Returning to the definition of leadership	<p>Defined as 'the process whereby one or more people motivate one or more people to contribute to the achievement of collective goals by shaping beliefs, values, and understandings in context'.</p> <p><i>Four key points</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Leadership is grounded in relationships and connections.</li> <li>2. Without some form of followship there can be no leadership.</li> </ol>

<sup>59</sup> See Ospina (2017) p.278 who describes 'Shared/ distributed' leadership as a 'school' of leadership and as part of the shift from transformational to collective leadership.

<sup>60</sup> See Ospina (2017) p.280.

<sup>61</sup> See Nguyen, T., Berman, E., Plimmer, G., Samartini, A., Sabharwal, M., & Taylor, J. (2022). Enriching Transactional Leadership with Public Values. *Public Administration Review* 82(6): 1058-1076. <https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.13495>

<sup>62</sup> Haslam et al (2024).

<sup>63</sup> Haslam et al (2024), p.1.

<sup>64</sup> Haslam et al (2024), p.2.

<sup>65</sup> Haslam et al (2024), p.10.

		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3. Leadership is more about getting people to want to do things than about making them do it.</li> <li>4. Leadership is a group process and ultimately about the activities of collectives not just individuals.</li> </ol>
3	Recognising the cost of zombie leadership	<p><i>Four key costs</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Fails to recognise and reward the efforts and achievements of ordinary people.</li> <li>2. Alienates group members and reduces their willingness to contribute.</li> <li>3. Damages leaders by inducing narcissism, complacency, and unwillingness to listen.</li> <li>4. Reduces the productivity and health of groups and societies.</li> </ol>
4	Championing theoretical & practical alternatives to zombie leadership	<p><i>Four key priorities</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Champion approaches that broaden our understanding of leadership beyond leaders.</li> <li>2. Champion approaches that see leadership as a process by which everyone can, and needs to, contribute.</li> <li>3. Champion approaches that recognise success depends upon connections between leaders and their group.</li> <li>4. Champion approaches to leadership development that prioritize these objectives.</li> </ol>
Source: According to Haslam et al (2024)		

### 3. Lag between theory, practice and peer review

Leadership theories and approaches to development are shifting and changing all the time- often with a disjuncture between theory and practice. The time lag between theory, practice and peer reviewed research on both (and vice versa) makes it difficult to gauge what leadership development approaches work. This is against a backdrop of rapidly changing and challenging environments that public servants face and work within. The extent to which current changes in public sector operating environments are reflected in leadership research is contested and difficult to fully gauge with limited peer review research squarely on the matter.

Ascertaining 'how recent' is also complicated for several reasons including time lags in academic publishing. In addition, those in the business of leadership development don't tend to publish academic research about how and what they cover (often considered 'trade secrets in a highly competitive environment) among other reasons.

In practice, such lags can result in leadership development going ahead without a sound evidence base for its efficacy and vice versa, approaches still been used that may not be fit for purpose. Many leadership development approaches lack a sound theory of change with associated indicators and outcomes that can be monitored and tracked over time. Rather evaluation often only takes the form of participant feedback, sometimes referred to as 'happy sheets' that gauge participant feedback about their individual experience of an offering, not the wider efficacy and impact of the learning into practice. The development of a tailored theory of change should be developed at the outset and is critical to inform and track leadership development at multiple levels- including at the individual, team, organisational and system levels.<sup>66</sup> There is a significant opportunity for public sectors to develop and apply theories of change not only at a program or organisational level, but also to how leaders and leadership is cultivated across all levels in order to form a coherent pathway and approach to leadership development. Further research is required about how positive (and negative) changes are defined, identified, recognised and verified, especially regarding intangible aspects of leadership development. This is especially pertinent for senior executive leadership programs that involve more informal and experiential approaches where traditional evaluation models of learning transfer based on fixed objectives are unable to capture emerging program outcomes.<sup>67</sup>

### 4. Limited data on leadership development and impact

To date, the field of public sector leader development has generally been dominated by practitioners, many from large, private sector firms that offer suites of assessments and 'best practices', often derived from and

<sup>66</sup> See Better Evaluation Knowledge, nd. 'Describe the theory of change'. <https://www.betterevaluation.org/frameworks-guides/managers-guide-evaluation/scope-evaluation/describe-theory-change>

<sup>67</sup> See Watkins, K. E., Lysø, I. H., & deMarrais, K. (2011). Evaluating Executive Leadership Programs: A Theory of Change Approach. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 13(2), 208-239. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1523422311415643>, p.208.

grounded in private sector contexts.<sup>68</sup> Although limited, there are some examples of leadership development impact. For example, Yemiscigil et al (2022) found authentic leadership development not only had the benefit of improving leadership skills, but also the wellbeing of leaders more broadly, which as they describe, may be one of the most important benefits of authentic leadership.<sup>69</sup> Emerging insights from Born & Yemiscigil (2024) suggest that there are seven key attributes that make leadership development impactful: a focus on holistic growth, encouraging self-reflection, addressing stress with precision, opting for shorter/ intensive programs, paying attention to resistance, developing strategies for sustained impact, and embracing online programs for efficiency.<sup>70</sup>

To better understand **how public sector leadership is developed**, Marcy (2024) calls for research that explores several aspects. These include: exploring the implications of the interaction between key components (such as competencies) and other areas of development (such as identity); how leadership learning gained in the classroom is leveraged in real world environments; reviewing competency-based developmental programs to determine what competencies are used, to what degree, to what purpose, and what developable elements of the competencies are being addressed (and which aren't) in existing programs; how public sector leaders continue to develop post leadership training, what role coaching and/or mentoring plays in reinforcing certain modes of training; and ultimately the creation of more rigorous leader development theories that are specifically tailored to public sector contexts with accompanying research over a long-range time-span.<sup>71</sup>

Whilst many public sectors rely on capability frameworks to guide leadership development approaches and programs, questions remain about how they are actually used in practice, their utility and how to better track alignment and impact. Recent research by Hastings et al (2025) looked at capability frameworks in three Australian jurisdictions (Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria) found variation in the types of leadership competencies and how they are intended to be used (e.g. different employee levels, individual vs organisational wide etc).<sup>72</sup> They found that a focus on relational leadership competencies in all three jurisdictions was limited to some provision of competencies relating to catalytic emergent states and technical competencies.<sup>73</sup> According to Hastings et al (2025) leadership development should involve both internal (i.e., individual) and external (i.e., relational) changes over time. Measuring leadership capabilities should occur at regular intervals to compare progress in line with the introduction of any leadership development mechanisms or training programs. This includes: 1) pre, post, and follow-up changes in leadership capabilities; 2) pre, post, and follow-up changes in leadership mindset; 3) the efficacy of the training itself (training evaluations); 4) any relationships between leadership capability improvements and changes in the public sector objectives (e.g., improvement in service delivery) and 5) the measurement of processes, behaviours, and teams' perceptions, over tangible outcomes which can be influenced by other contextual factors.<sup>74</sup>

More careful evidence-based research, clarity and arguably pragmatism is required about the distinctions, effectiveness and limitations of different leadership development approaches and the utility of capability frameworks in order to avoid 'zombie leadership'<sup>75</sup> and leadership 'fads'.<sup>76</sup>

## 5. Who and how 'effectiveness' is defined?

As Deng et al (2022) emphasise, determining which model of leadership is most helpful for developing leaders and achieving an organisation's desired results is complex.<sup>77</sup> Decades of research has focused on defining and understanding leadership, resulting in a multitude of leadership models, but as these models become increasingly nuanced with recent theoretical developments, navigating and applying them in practice can be extremely difficult.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Marcy (2023), p.262.

<sup>69</sup> Yemiscigil, A., Born, D., Snook, S., & Pate, E. (2022). Authentic leader(ship) development and leaders' psychological well-being: an outcome-wide analysis, *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, 43(8): 1287-1307. <https://doi.org/10.1108/LODJ-11-2021-0525>

<sup>70</sup> Born, D. H., & Yemiscigil, A. (2024). *What Makes Leadership Development Impactful? Exploring a Whole-Person Approach*. *Journal of Character and Leadership Development*, 11(2), 84–90.; Yemiscigil, Born & Ling (2023).

<sup>71</sup> Marcy (2023), p. 270-1.

<sup>72</sup> Hastings, B et al (2025). Relational Leadership: an approach to public sector capability development ANZSOG Research Insights, No.41. Australia & New Zealand School of Government., p.51.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, p.52.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, p.39

<sup>75</sup> Haslam, S., & Alvesson, M., & Reicher, S. (2024). Zombie leadership: Dead ideas that still walk among us. *Leadership Quarterly*, 35(3):1-14.

<sup>76</sup> See Deng et al (2023), p.628.

<sup>77</sup> Deng et al (2022), p.627.

<sup>78</sup> Deng et al (2022), p.627.

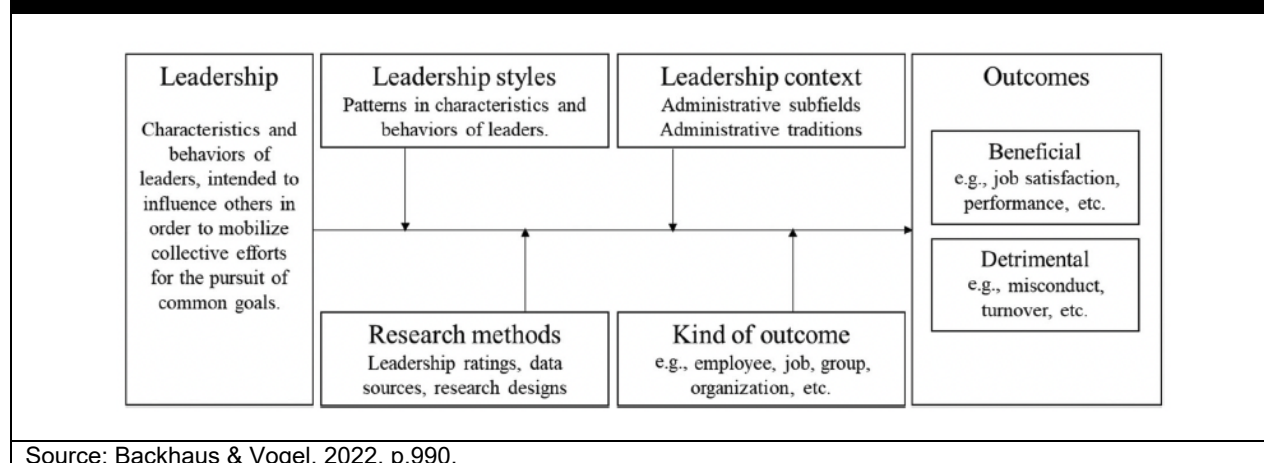
The question of 'effectiveness' including how it is defined and can be measured is complex and difficult to gauge. There is a lack of peer reviewed research on the 'effectiveness' of different approaches, how they compare, are taught and with what impact. For example, Chapman et al (2016) reviewed twenty-five years of public service leadership research (1987-2012) from a selection of 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**.<sup>79</sup>

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.<sup>80</sup> They detail how this also explains why a key task of leadership is not only to understand these things but also to actively shape them<sup>81</sup> 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 is generally very 'messy'.<sup>82</sup>

A 2022 **meta-analysis** of styles, outcomes, contexts and methods of leadership in the public sector is one example of attempts to try and make sense of the breadth and impact of different leadership approaches.<sup>83</sup> The meta-analysis by Backhaus & Vogel (2022) was based on 486 effect sizes from 151 quantitative studies published since 2000 and found that different leadership styles seem to work well in different public sector settings, as the effectiveness of leadership depends on the administrative tradition and, yet to a much smaller extent, on the administrative subfield. The overall finding that context matters with warnings against overgeneralisation are critical when considering the intended and realised impact of different leadership development approaches.

Table 3 below details the framework developed and used by Backhaus & Vogel (2022) in their meta-analysis. It provides a helpful schematic outline of key factors that are necessary to consider when reading and learning about leadership approaches and their perceived effectiveness.

**TABLE 3: Schema for contextualising leadership research**



## 6. Underestimating how much context matters

Our understanding of how leadership styles and approaches interact with the context in which public sector leadership occurs is complex and limited (see Appendix Table 1 for further information). As detailed in Section 1.1, 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

<sup>79</sup> Chapman et al (2016), p. 121.

<sup>80</sup> Haslam et al (2024), p.6

<sup>81</sup> See Reicher & Hopkins (1996, 2001); Reicher et al., (2005) as cited in Haslam et al (2024), p.6.

<sup>82</sup> See Blom & Alvesson (2015b, p.978) as cited in Haslam et al (2024), p.6.

<sup>83</sup> Backhaus & Vogel (2022).

across different Departments and agencies- each with their own idiosyncrasies.<sup>84</sup> These are significant factors that influence how leadership emerges, is practiced and can be developed.

Contextual factors need to be considered when studying and deciphering the effectiveness of different leadership development approaches. For the public sector, drawing on the work of Backhaus & Vogel (2022) these include (although not limited to):

1	Administrative traditions and system	Leadership may co-vary with national and administrative traditions and cultures and are likely to be characterised by different configurations of 'substitutes for leadership' <sup>85</sup> , which may enhance or neutralise the effects of leadership. <sup>86</sup>
2	Variations in subfields of public sector research	Leadership has been studied in subfields of the public sector as diverse as the federal government (e.g., Caillier, 2014), education (e.g., Bauwens et al., 2019), and the military (e.g., Hattke et al., 2018). <sup>87</sup>
3	Variations in professional culture	The emergence and effectiveness of leadership may be contingent on the distinct professional cultures in each of the subfields detailed above.

However, these factors and the extent to which they matter are but not always clearly identified or accounted for in leadership development literature.

## WHERE TO NEXT?

The purpose of this paper has been to try and synthesise why leadership development for the public sector is hard to get right. **Who and what the 'right' type, style or theory of leadership** for the public sector and how it can or should be developed is both unclear and contested.

In the absence of definitive 'one size fits all' approach, the intention of this paper is to **raise awareness** and draw attention to some of the main factors to help inform public sector decision making about leadership development approaches and programs.

This paper has shown how there is clearly a need for **further research** specific to the public sector, especially regarding more comprehensive theoretical frameworks and longitudinal research on impact. Whilst many public sectors rely on capability frameworks to guide leadership development approaches and programs, questions remain about how they are actually used in practice, their utility and how to better track alignment and impact over time. Ensuring any leadership development approach is **attuned to context** and informed by a sound **theory of change with indicators** to continually track and ensure alignment is a sound place to start.

The task of getting leadership development right for the public sector is **not insurmountable**, rather requires awareness of factors and steps taken to ensure approaches are fit for purpose to achieve positive impact in practice.

<sup>84</sup> Backhaus & Vogel (2022)

<sup>85</sup> Citing Kerr & Jermier, 1978 in Backhaus & Vogel (2022), p.987.

<sup>86</sup> See House et al., (2004); Painter & Peters, (2010); as cited in Backhaus & Vogel (2022), p.987.

<sup>87</sup> Backhaus & Vogel (2022), p.987.