Improving leadership by choosing right methods for skills acquisition

Benchmarks from European public administration

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AFRICAN-FINNISH PARTNERSHIPS ON TAXATION CAPACITY IN AFRICA

Introduction

The predominant trends in contemporary and prospective societal evolution are heavily intertwined with technological advancements. A pivotal component of these transformative phenomena lies in the reconstitution of governmental and public entities.

The purpose of this concept paper is to provide a view of perceptions from the European public sector on leadership and improvement of leadership skills. Public sector is a large sector of the economy and society and contributes to a countries' competitiveness and well-being. Leaders within the public sector hold a pivotal role in shaping the trajectory of our societies.

1. Public administration in Europe

The broad perspective on public administration includes political, economic, legal and social dimensions. Public administration is primarily seeking to understand the effectiveness and efficiency of the provision of public goods, the rationality and legitimacy of programmes and policies, the organization and management of public sector and organizational behaviour of the people working in the public sector (de Vries, 2016). Public sector is a large sector of the economy and society and also contributes in multiple ways to a countries' competitiveness and well-being (Hartley, 2010).

The influence of governmental activities on citizens life might be significant. Containing public expenditure became a priority for governments in western Europe. In some countries, public expenditures account for over 40% of gross domestic product (GDP). In the European Union the general government expenditures as a percentage of GDP is 46.77%, while in the Sub-Saharan Africa it is 22.39%.

Classical public administrator must operate in a hierarchy governed by the rules, regulations and standard operating procedures. In continental European countries, administration is also seen as the application of laws. This may impose limits of managerialism, power of management, and the roles of public officials and managers. The discussion has been ongoing debate about the distinctiveness between public and private management. In today's intricate global landscape, navigating human dynamics and optimizing performance necessitates a fresh perspective centered on collaboration, reciprocal trust, and continuous learning (Virtanen & Tammeaid, 2020).

2. Leadership skills and competences

Leadership includes visioning, setting direction, creating internal-external organizational alignment, inspiring others, and building commitment (McCauley, Velsor, & Ruderman, 2010). Leadership involves the exercise of influence over others to work towards task completion, attainment of common goals and relationships (Reiche, Bird, Mendenhall, & Osland, 2017).

Leadership performance refers to the range of outcomes resulting from the exercise of leadership, particularly after training or development. Performance effects may be evident at multiple levels in the organization. Leadership development refers to initiatives that increase leadership capacity across the entire organization or community (Day, Fleenor, Atwater, Sturm, & McKee, 2014; DeRue & Myers, 2014).

Public sector leadership faces challenges related to values and performance. While traditional roles centered on state finances and regulatory power, the landscape is shifting. Public institutions now need leaders who embrace a service-oriented mindset. These leaders prioritize understanding individual capabilities, motivating teams, and delivering value. Tammeiad & Virtanen (2020) consider that there is a shift toward nurturing leadership encourages innovation, foresight, collaboration, and progress. The commodification and de-professionalization of public services call for adaptive leadership that aligns with societal changes (Virani & van der Wal, 2023).

Traditionally, public institutions promote leaders based on technical expertise, but this approach had its pitfalls. Content specialists, when elevated to leadership positions, sometimes struggled to balance content matters with effective leadership. However, today's public sector demands a different breed of leaders. These leaders excel at leading by example, understanding individual capabilities, and motivating teams to deliver maximum value. At the group or the team level, the leader's behavior has an impact on colleagues or subordinates, and at the organizational level, the leader's behavior may impact key drivers of the organization, such as client satisfaction, internal culture, and levels of wastage (Sorenson, 2017).

These are a range of intrapersonal and interpersonal skills that leaders use as they interact with others in the performance of their functions. Leaders use intrapersonal skills when they demonstrate self-awareness, self-efficacy, and the management of their emotions. Leaders need interpersonal skills to express empathy, communicate effectively, motivate, influence, and inspire others (Farmer, 2012; Malleon, Anderson, & Boyden, 2016).

3. Methods to improve leadership skills

This chapter summarizes few case examples from Europe to improve leadership skills. These methods are selected to ensure skills acquisition. It is relevant to address that training skills requires experiences and directed continuum directed of experiences towards the desired goals. The methods support to gain experiences (for example in training), reflect and support the direction towards growth and development. Like for everyone, also for leaders it is relevant to;

- to consider peer-to-peer activities to ensure the share of knowledge and learning from others
- to consider the importance of first experiences in training or development (attraction) because the motivation increases learning
- the skills acquisition experiences (continuum) should be directed towards the directed goals

3.1 "Reformer" Renewing Public Sector –program in Finland

Good enough? Renewing Public Sector – Enabling Public Leadership - Training program is a leadership training program that aims at enhancing the leadership skills and at fostering collaboration between the Finnish public sector organisations. The participants may come from the 12 ministries, several different central agencies, and municipalities (at middle management or top levels).

The goals in this program for public sector leaders are to increase capacity and ability for and to change, to ease the move onto new learning practices and models, and promotion of (work)cultural change. Concretely the programme offers:

1) four two-days modules in a boarding-school execution and three one-days modules remotely through Teams (total of 11 days)
2) pre-, intermediate and post-assignments
3) experimentation (a small project initiated during the program),
4) broad material bank on an e-learning platform.
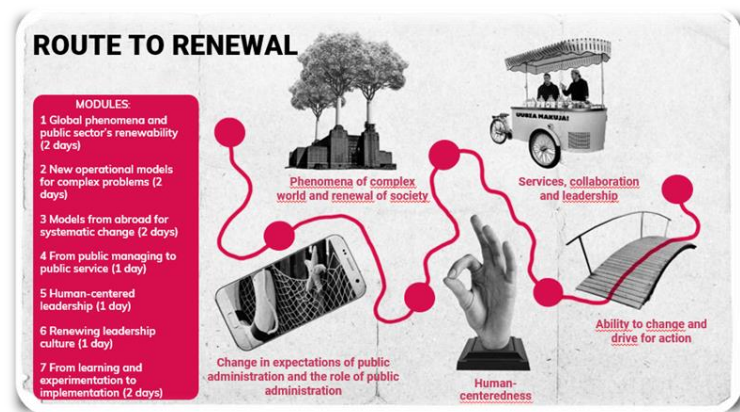
Picture 1. Route to Renewal (HAUS Finnish Institute of Public Management).

In practice in this program there is a promotion of the dialogic, future-oriented, collaborative, and enabling leadership culture, support of identification of one's own strengths as a leader and the use of "the strength glasses" in human management. Lastly, the learnings will be take to practice through experimentation. (HAUS Finnish Institute of Public Administration).

3.2 Leadership Academy Program by the European Council

Leadership Academy Programme (LAP) by the European Council is an interactive instructional curriculum tailored for governmental entities across hierarchical tiers aimed at fostering leadership competencies pertinent to organizational governance, strategic management, and capacity enhancement.

LAP builds upon the capacity of the selected public organisation to share a clear vision, to understand the key challenges and to influence systems. It therefore provides capacity-building tools to prototype system changes in several relevant areas, such as performance management, service planning, citizens' participation and partnership working. (Council of Europe, 2020). The following leadership matrix provides the overview of LAP's levels and challenges of leadership identified:

Picture 2: Leadership Matrix (Council of Europe, 2020).

3.3 Focusing coaching leadership approach

Coaching leadership approach is an increasingly recognized leadership model today. However, its impact and practical applicability remain a question mark for many organizations. Traditional authoritarian leadership methods differ significantly from the empowering and enabling coaching leadership. Nevertheless, it has been observed that both approaches can enhance productivity and individual performance.

What exactly is coaching leadership? What does the coaching leadership approach entail? Effective coaching leadership involves practices such as active listening, reflective questioning, goal setting, self-assessment, and feedback as integral parts of the leadership process.

In practice, this means emphasizing communication skills, skill development, and self-directedness in both leadership and organizational model-building. A coaching approach highlights an individual's ability to define and evaluate their own actions. A skilled coaching leader can even shape common practices that promote organizational learning and success models.

3.4 Management system and process development (LEAN)

During strategic changes, there is usually a need to modify the management system. This involves analyzing and adjusting aspects such as managed matters, management practices, management forums, objectives, roles, and responsibilities. An effective management system ensures the implementation of the strategy and contributes to the well-being of the personnel.

Process development, or Lean thinking and methods, are the most common management systems in the world. Lean consists of values, principles, methods, and tools. Customer value, teamwork, and continuous improvement are at the core. Lean is very suitable for public administration. When there is a need to provide a service to a citizen or customer on time, improving productivity, using Lean methods is the solution. These lead to improved customer and staff satisfaction and a lighter cost structure.

3.4 Mentoring

Mentoring is an excellent method for developing skills, which, when embedded in an organization's structure, serves as a support for targeted development, a builder of trust, and a means of transferring tacit knowledge. At its best, it also serves as a means of employer engagement.

Mentoring programs are based on coaching mentoring, where the key is systematic goal setting and striving for them. Coaching mentoring can be particularly utilized in promoting the learning of management, supervisors, and experts. Mentoring can also support induction processes and internal task transitions within the organization.

3.6 Coaching as a method for developing work communities

Coaching is also a central method for developing a work community. Coaching, also known as dialogue-based coaching, provides tools for enhancing expertise and building effective communication, interaction, and higher-quality operating models. It supports both individuals and teams working in public administration in creating a smoother everyday life. Coaching professionals and high-quality methods at your disposal, allowing us to tailor the training program specifically to your needs.

Areas of focus include:

- Skill development and continuous learning
- Self-directedness
- Community and interpersonal skills
- Agile action in times of change
- Leadership and workplace skills
- Work well-being, motivation, and commitment

4 Example of 3-days Soft Skills Training Programme

Soft skills training	
Target group:	top level, middle management, supervisors
Learning outcomes	- understand empathy and learn to manage interpersonal relationships - understand scenario planning and risk management - learn to create a compelling vision - developed active listening techniques and effective verbal and non-verbal communication skill - be able to provide constructive feedback for the employees. - gain persuasion and negotiation skills - understand team dynamics and roles - be able to facilitate productive meetings and leverage diversity - develop resilience and coping strategies - be able aligning goals with organizational strategy will be a key outcome
Methods	30 mins teaser lectures for common understanding - peer-to-peer discussions - case study presentations - role-playing, and practical exercises - coaching and mentoring
DAY 1	**Building Strong Foundations**
Morning	Communication Excellence
	Expectations planning - Active listening techniques - Verbal and non-verbal communication - Constructive feedback - Storytelling for impact
Afternoon	Emotional Intelligence
	- Self-awareness and self-regulation (360 assessment - Empathy and understanding emotions - Managing interpersonal relationships - Conflict resolution strategies Retrospective Wrap-up
DAY 2	**Leading with Impact**
Morning	**Influential Leadership**

	Expectations planning - Persuasion and negotiation skills - Building trust and credibility - Motivating and inspiring others - Leading through change
Afternoon	Effective Team Collaboration (Exercise)
	- Team dynamics and roles - Facilitating productive meetings - Leveraging diversity - Problem-solving as a team Retrospective Wrap-up
DAY 3	**Elevating Leadership Excellence**
Morning	Adaptive Leadership
	Expectations planning - Agility in decision-making (increase the use of new tools, AI) - Navigating ambiguity - Resilience and coping strategies - Balancing short-term goals with long-term vision
Afternoon	Strategic Thinking and Vision
	- Aligning goals with organizational strategy - Creating a compelling vision - Scenario planning and risk management - Leading innovation Retrospective Wrap-up

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