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Leadership for the public sphere: Purposes, publics and political astuteness

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Jean Hartley
Professor of Public Leadership,
The Open University, UK



Aims of this session

- Re-examine what is meant by public leadership
- Look at the purposes of public leadership
- Think about the publics which leadership works with (and sometimes convenes)
- Consider the political astuteness skills needed by public leaders – especially public servants
- Be provocative, evidence-based and with practical implications

My research base



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Research with elected politicians, including leadership development for Ministers in central government, opposition, and in devolved government

Research and leadership development with local politicians across the UK

Research on leadership by public servants of innovation and organizational change, in local government, civil service, health, policing and prisons.

Dual leadership between politicians and senior public servants.

Leadership with political astuteness:

Phase 1 1500 UK managers in public, private and voluntary sectors.

Phase 2 with over 1000 public managers in UK, Australia and New Zealand

Phase 3 Police leadership

Phase 4 Health leadership

Leadership in conflicted societies including leadership for peace-building in Northern Ireland and South Sudan

Working with UK 21 police forces Centre for Policing Research and Learning



Public leadership contributions to the wider field of leadership

Plato and Aristotle – city leadership, and leadership development

Machiavelli – leadership and its development in conditions of volatility and uncertainty;

Military studies – personal leadership; leadership of teams

McGregor Burns – transformational and transactional leadership among politicians

Greenleaf – servant leadership

Heifetz – adaptive leadership

Spillane, Bolden – distributed leadership

What else might we discover?

What is public leadership

Mobilising individuals, organisations and networks to formulate and/or enact purposes, values and actions which aim or claim to create valued outcomes for the public sphere.

This leadership may come from the public, private or voluntary sectors. It is defined as “public” leadership by its outcomes for the public sphere, not just by its inputs from state actors. It therefore includes:

- Political leadership (elected in democratic societies)
- Professional leadership in public services (e.g. clinical leadership in health, public managers in local and central government; police leadership)
- Community or civic leadership – civil society activists and social movement claiming to act for the public good (e.g. social campaigners and activists)
- Private sector leadership generating public goods, corporate social responsibility

The public sphere

- An arena where people debate and shape public matters and challenges values, decisions and activities in the market, the state and civil society.

(eg Habermas, Bryson, Sennett)

- The public sphere is not the same as the state. The public sphere includes state, market and civil society.
- The public sphere is not given, but made – it has to be continuously (re)created and (re)constructed.

Leadership in a time of complexity

- A period of profound simultaneous structural changes in the ecological, political economic and social context – climate change; peak oil; artificial intelligence/robotics/algorithms; global corporations beyond democratic control; deepening and sharpening of inequalities; large-scale migrations and movement of refugees; loss of trust in politicians/ governments and the establishment; politics of identity; rise of populism, nationalism and illiberal democracies.
- This is provoking a Copernican revolution in mind-sets, and requiring a shift from solely reductionist analysis to an understanding of complex unpredictable, adaptive systems.
- For many people this complexity is experienced in terms of loss of control, sense of direction and deep multi-layered uncertainties.

VUCA (US Army, 1997)

- **Volatility** – nature, speed, volume, magnitude and dynamics of change
- **Uncertainty** - lack of predictability of issues and events
- **Complexity** - the inter-connectedness of processes – whole systems dynamics with unpredictable outcomes.
- **Ambiguity** – variety of interpretations about what is going on/what things mean

These create white water conditions for leadership.

Polycentric, networked governance

- Polycentric governance noted by Ostrom (eg 2001, 2010)
- Multi-level governance, based on overlapping spheres not only hierarchical tiers of influence (Benington, 2000)
- Collaborative governance (Ansell and Torfing, 2014)
- The hollowing out of the central state (Rhodes 1996)
- Power and authority no longer primarily located in “central” government (devolution and localism create new sources of authority and legitimacy)
- Polycentric systems can be robust in handling change – greater flexibility although also messy

Joint leadership

Polycentric governance systems include complexity and contest and leadership can take different forms:

- Leadership roles in parallel (distributed leadership)
- Leadership roles in concert (collaborative leadership)
- Leadership roles battling each other (adversarial leadership)

Public leadership has to grapple with increased conflict and intensified contest

- Confronting complex problems means that there is only rarely a single agreed public goal to be achieved
- The many different stakeholders have divergent values, goals, ideologies, interests
- Complex negotiations between multiple, cross-cutting and competing interests may be necessary before it is possible to create a coalition with a common purpose (eg Brexit; South Sudan)
- ‘Agonistic pluralism’ (Mouffe, 2005) to generate respectful contest over ideas and actions, rather than antagonistic bi-polar zero sum conflict.

Contestation is at the heart of public leadership

“If everyone were to be perfectly agreed on ends and means, no-one would ever need to change the way of another. Hence, no relations of influence or power would arise. Hence no political system would exist. Let one person frustrate another in the pursuit of his goals and you already have the germ of a political system: conflict and politics are born inseparable twins.”

Robert Dahl, 1970

Leadership of contest and conflict

Leaderships may need to:

- Create a safe “holding environment” in which to surface and work through the conflicts
- Bring different interests together – to try to negotiate a coalition with a degree of common purpose
- To raise and explore difficult questions about competing values, goals and priorities
- Remind people about the problem to be tackled and the outcomes to be achieved
- Keep in mind the longer term value to be created for the public sphere
- Take the flak when stakeholders disagree about action

Purposes: Clarity of purpose is key to leadership in a VUCA world

- Control over the immediate environment is low
- It is possible to have a sense of where you want to get to
- How you get there may depend on the conditions, but knowing where you want to get to is key
- It helps to keep the workforce engaged, and clear about their purpose

One approach to purpose is to discern and create **public value** (Benington and Moore, 2011).

Leadership to create public value

Public value: Mark Moore (1995) – What is the value which public organizations create given that they don't have profits or markets as the marker of value?

Developed further by John Benington (2011)

Two dimensions of public value:

- What does the public most value?
- What adds value to the public sphere?

These are difficult questions. Who decides? How to handle the tensions between these?

Leadership for public value must handle contest

- There isn't a single "public value" (and it may change over time)
- Debates and discussions help people to consider a range of views and agree to come to some sort of conclusion

Leadership may need to:

- Bring people together – sometimes to create a public
- Recognise that there may be several publics
- To raise and explore difficult questions about priorities
- Remind people about key purposes
- Keep in mind the value being created for the public sphere
- Take the flak when stakeholders disagree about action

Example: South Sudan



50 years of civil war/war of independence; broken infrastructure; subsistence level economy; hyperinflation; high levels of poverty and disease; refugee crisis. Few girls get schooling beyond the age of 10 (not so many more boys).

Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2005 keeps breaking down.

Inability to establish peace because the military and political leaderships represent fragments, factions, tribes, not the whole nation. Leadership unable to reach out beyond its own supporters.

South Sudan: Ibba Girls School



A grassroots attempt to create a community school as a small island of peace within the complex, conflicted, atomised country – a safe environment in which girls and staff from different

backgrounds can come and learn together, including skills with “both the pen and the hoe”, elections for prefects, and debates every Friday afternoon.

The leadership of this pre-figurative school involves orchestrating and aligning a large number of diverse stakeholders across the community, behind a common vision and purpose.

Example: Police leadership to tackle rural crime



Leadership to tackle rural crime

(Hartley, Parker, Beashel 2019)



Cambridgeshire rural community had lost faith in police to tackle hare-coursing. Over 800 incidents across winter/spring. Illegal sport, illegal betting, and also led to damage to crops, farm equipment, isolated residents threatened and intimidated.

A signal crime – indicative of other crimes happening. Passions very high. Local landowners, farmers, gamekeepers and residents close to vigilante action.

Leadership challenge: to convene a public



The police had to act quickly if serious physical harm was to be averted. They could not act solely by prosecuting offenders (area too large; trust too low, danger of vigilantism).

They led by engaging with the angry rural residents in a large, lively meeting, listening to the views and voices of multiple publics. They were convening a public to tackle this signal crime.

They then established a dedicated rural crime team, with officers with deep knowledge of rural farming and living.

Leadership, authority and legitimacy

- Leadership studies have often conflated leadership with authority, whether in public or private sector organizations (less so the voluntary sector)
- Particularly where leaders are acting with the authority of the state.
- The need to pay attention to informal not only formal leadership (opinion leaders, positive deviants, tempered radicals)
- Leadership with, beyond and without authority (Heifetz, 1994; Hartley and Benington, 2010)
- Legitimacy – whether leadership is accepted

Practising leadership in a VUCA context



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- Ability to read the changing context – what kind of context is this? How fast is it changing? How might it be different from the way I assume? Who else might help interpret this context?
- Leadership on the move – judgement is dynamic not final
- Who else is exercising leadership in this context?
- How can publics be involved or convened?
- Political astuteness – savvy about other people and their competing interests and motives
- Good antennae and networks for intelligence about a changing world

Leadership requires political astuteness



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political 'nous'

political acuity

Political antennae

Political awareness

savvy

'Metis'

political intelligence

Dealing with big p and small p politics



The particular challenges for public managers

They work for organizations which are inherently political - so more likely to be involved in contested and political matters (both formally and informally).

But they mustn't become too closely involved in politics – in many government systems public servants are expected to be politically neutral

How do public managers navigate the tensions between these two sets of expectations?

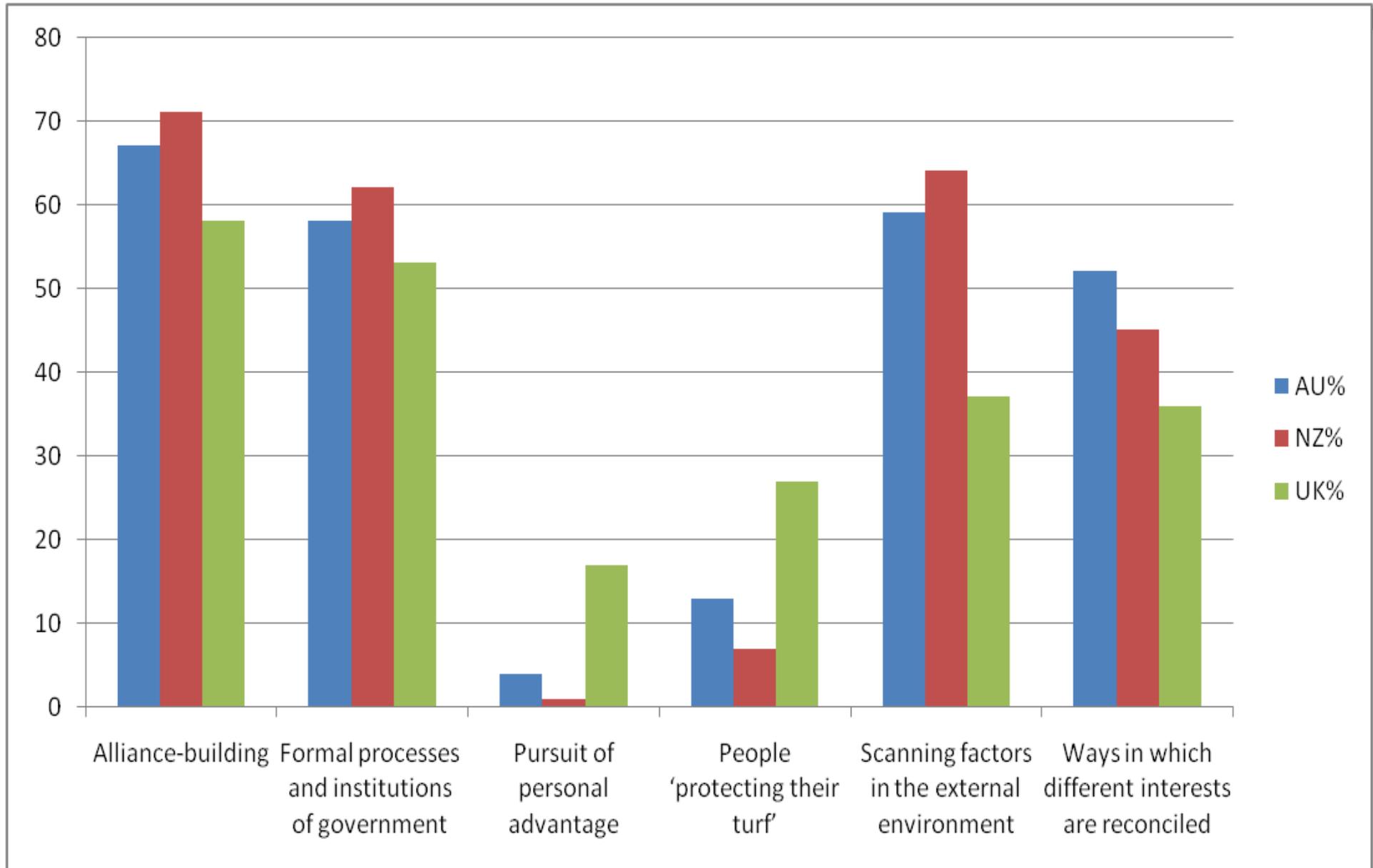
Leadership with political astuteness



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- Too much leadership research has assumed common goals. Instead it is helpful to think about plurality of goals and interests
- The ability to work with diverse and sometimes competing interests, values, goals and priorities of a range of collaborators/competitors/stakeholders (Hartley and Fletcher, 2008; Hartley et al, 2013)
- ‘Big P’ and ‘small p’ politics
- Political astuteness can be used to achieve social and organizational outcomes – can be constructive (or destructive)

Comparative analysis: Public servants Australia, New Zealand, UK (n = 1012)



Interviews (ANZUK study)

- *P08 (senior manager, AU): “[Politics is] primarily about mobilising support for a course of action. Now that might be support within the organisation, that is not people that you either work for or work for you directly necessarily, but that broader base of support. It could be mobilising support in political office.”*
- *P06 (senior manager, AU) “it’s about how in fact you engage with those stakeholders in order to achieve what you’re trying to achieve for the organisation as a whole in support of what community objectives are.”*

More interviews:

- *P04 (senior manager, AU): “I think you’re actually using them all the time, I don’t think you’re a useful or productive senior bureaucrat, influencing policy, unless you’re doing both at the same time.”*
- *P23 (very senior manager, NZ): “It completely pervades my life. It’s every breath we take here.”*
- *P08 (senior manager, AU): “...in senior executive positions in government, what I’m struggling to do is think of a situation where I haven’t found political skills to be useful, rather than examples of where I have...”*
- *P26: Without [political astuteness] you can be a very very effective managerial, operational, tactical person, but you can just go crunch with the politicians, and it will not work.*

LWPA Skills framework

(Hartley and Fletcher, 2008)



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Strategic Direction and Scanning

Building Alignment and Alliances

Reading People and Situations

Interpersonal Skills

Personal Skills

HELLO DEAR, I'M GOING TO BE
LATE HOME. I'VE GOT TO BUILD
ALLIANCES & PRACTISE MY
INTERPERSONAL SKILLS



ROBERT THOMPSON

The need to pair and share leadership at the strategic apex

- A particular form of dual leadership occurs at the strategic apex of many public service organizations e.g. Minister and Perm Sec; chief executive and clinical director; artistic and finance director
- The ‘politics/administration dichotomy’ but also much wider than this.
- “Dancing on Ice” – both leaders need to understand and work with each other to maintain dynamic equilibrium on a slippery surface in the spotlight (Manzie and Hartley, 2013)
- The roles overlap – there is a zone not a line between their roles (Alford, Hartley, Yates and Hughes, 2013)

Survey data – Top sources of developing political skills (% very or extremely valuable; 24 possible sources)



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Learning from own mistakes	88%
Gaining experience in the job	86%
Handling crises	85%
Good example of senior manager	77%
Bad example of a senior manager	70%
Working with other organizations	67%

The need to foster personal resilience in leaders



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- Constant attention to a fast-changing environment, pluralist interests, polycentric governance, encouraging staff, dealing with stakeholders, assessing public value outcomes can be emotionally and physically draining
- Leadership and well-being – are we doing enough?
- Restorative resilience – knowing when to step back (the value of a leadership constellation); research with medical students encouraging them to read literature and drama
- Preventative resilience – helps to develop inner resources for managing the paradoxes of leadership (Individual, family, unit, community: Rand, 2011)

Conclusions

- No-one said leadership was easy!
- It can be learnt and developed – experience and reflection are both important.
- Developing frameworks for analysing context, thinking about public purpose not just technical skills
- Recognising many publics, many leaderships and how to work with these is important.
- Public value creates a focus on purpose and outcomes – what are we trying to achieve here?
- Political astuteness is a core skill for public servants – it can be used constructively
- These may help at a time of turbulence and change

Further information:

Jean Hartley

Department of Public Leadership & Social Enterprise
Open University Business School
Open University
Walton Hall
Milton Keynes
MK7 6AA

jean.hartley@open.ac.uk