



Leading public sector networks: An empirical examination of integrative leadership behaviors

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ABSTRACT

The literature has often suggested that network leadership is different from leadership in hierarchical/single-agency structures. While this difference has been assumed, relatively little research has been conducted to determine whether such a distinction between network and hierarchical leadership actually exists. This study addresses this gap in the literature using data from 417 public sector leaders. We compared the leadership behaviors exhibited by a leader in their government agency with the behaviors exhibited by that same individual while leading his or her network. The leadership behaviors were classified into one of three categories common in the leadership literature. The results indicate that while the frequency of organization-oriented behaviors vary widely between the agency and network contexts, leaders in their networks focus more on people-oriented behaviors and less on task-oriented behaviors when compared to leading their agency.

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1. Introduction

A hallmark of research on collective action across sectors and geographic boundaries is the multitude of theoretical perspectives, conceptual frameworks, and empirical approaches employed to explain the topic. Researchers in various disciplines, including public administration, political science, sociology, organizational behavior, and economics, have studied multi-actor contexts, resulting in many rich literatures, some that merge nicely but, unfortunately, many others that tend to speak past one another. As Huxham (2003) argues, “even the most basic terminology is subject to varied interpretations and there seems to be little agreement over usage of terms such as ‘partnership,’ ‘alliance,’ ‘collaboration,’ ‘network,’ or ‘inter-organizational relations’” (402). Many basic questions have been asked: What are the antecedents to or determinants of collaboration (McGuire & Silvia, 2010; Thomson & Perry, 2006; Wood & Gray, 1991)? What motivates organizations to join multi-actor networks (Agranoff, 2007)? How do collaborative structures evolve/dissolve over time (Human & Provan, 2000)? What are the barriers encountered by networks and how do they overcome them (McGuire & Agranoff, 2007)? What factors influence the performance of collaborative arrangements, and how do such arrangements affect the performance of the projects and programs for which collaboration occurs (Meier & O’Toole, 2003)?

The research question that is the 800 lb gorilla in the room remains largely unaddressed: What is leadership in multi-actor settings? What behaviors characterize such a leader and, most important, how does leadership in these types of settings differ from leadership in single-agency contexts, if at all? Any discussion of action in multi-actor settings must necessarily begin with answers to these questions, yet few researchers have actually sought to define, identify, and explain leadership in such settings. Furthermore, there is no study that addresses these questions simply by studying how a large number of leaders lead their home

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agency, how they lead the network to which they belong, and how leadership varies across the two settings. Theoretically and conceptually (and, one could argue, speculatively), multi-actor or integrative leadership has been discussed; empirically, data on the subject are scarce.

In general, to integrate is to bring together parts to make a whole. When the “parts” are persons seeking to contribute to the common good who can only do so through collective action, one expects that the “whole” is greater than the sum of the parts. We use the term “network” to refer to that whole, or the form of an integrated structure that involves multiple actors—nodes—with multiple linkages, working on cross-boundary, collaborative activities. Such structures can be formal or informal, and they are typically intersectoral, intergovernmental, and based functionally in a specific problem or policy area. The melding of these parts does not just happen, however. Just as organizations require some degree of leadership to function effectively, so too do collaborative, integrated structures require leadership that facilitates productive interaction and moves the parts toward effective resolution of a problem. In some contexts, an actor representing a specific agency who is ultimately held accountable for arriving at an effective, shared solution to a problem may “take the lead.” This is particularly true in public management networks where the provision and delivery of public goods and services falls on the government leader's shoulders (McGuire, 2002).

This paper bridges the theory-data divide in order to provide an accurate picture of integrative leadership. Like studies that compare and contrast public sector management with private sector management (Allison, 1988; Rainey, Backoff, & Levine, 1976; Salamon, 2002), we endeavor to compare and contrast leadership in networks with single-agency leadership. Until significant evidence is offered to show there is a difference in leadership in these respective contexts, it is not appropriate to assume a difference or declare that a brand-new approach to leading is necessary (McGuire, 2003). Since the research hypothesis we test is that leaders respond to network needs and problems in ways that are different from that of single agencies, the focus of our investigation is a leader who operates in a network outside of his or her organization as well as inside that organization. Our research seeks answers to very simple questions: What behaviors characterize an integrative leader? How does integrative leadership differ from leadership in single-agency contexts, if at all? Using a sample of 417 network leaders, we will demonstrate quantitatively that leaders behave similarly in some ways, but that the differences across contexts are striking.

Our unit of analysis is the county-level emergency manager in the United States, who is held responsible for the mitigation of, preparation for, response to, and recovery from natural and man-made disasters. As we will argue, the local emergency manager is the ideal leader to study for comparing single-agency leadership behavior with integrative leadership behavior. Before discussing the findings, however, we will now lay the groundwork for the study by summarizing previous frameworks and research on both single-agency and integrative leadership.

2. Leadership research

Although leadership has been a mainstay of thought and discussion since the earliest of times, the modern study of leadership can be traced back to the late 1800s and the industrial revolution (Nahavandi, 2009; Van Wart, 2008). The combination of the rise in the use of scientific methods for the study of leadership (Nahavandi, 2009) and the central role of the leader in the scientific management movement (Van Wart, 2008) resulted in researchers attempting to identify the personal attributes and traits that would explain and predict leadership effectiveness. This approach assumed that an ideal leader would have some set of personality characteristics and physical attributes that would make him or her an ideal leader. Over the next few decades, researchers added to this list of such traits. However, as the list grew, many in the field saw this approach as fruitless. Not only was the “master list” of the necessary traits unobtainable, but it also did not account for the situational contexts in which the leader operated.

As a result, researchers began to focus on the behaviors exhibited by leaders as a way to understand and predict leadership. This movement in leadership scholarship is founded in the work undertaken by researchers at The Ohio State University and the University of Michigan. The results of studies using the questionnaires developed during the Ohio State leadership studies suggest that leadership behaviors can be categorized into two dimensions: consideration and initiating structures (Fleishman, 1953). Consideration behaviors include such things as “whether the leader is friendly and approachable, listens to subordinates' ideas and makes use of them, cares about the morale of the group, and otherwise deals with subordinates in an open, communicative, concerned fashion” (Rainey, 2003, 291). Initiating structure behaviors, on the other hand, refers to those behaviors which emphasize “setting standards, assigning roles, and pressing for productivity and performance” (Rainey, 2003, 291).

Since the time of the Ohio State and University of Michigan studies, numerous other frameworks for understanding leadership have been pursued. Much of the current work can be categorized as being part of the “contingency era” (Nahavandi, 2009) or the “transformational era” (Van Wart, 2003) of leadership research. This current research focuses either on transformational leadership, in which cultural change, vision, and charisma are central, or are attempts to integrate the existing trait, behavioral, and transformational leadership theories into a unified approach. Most of these researchers seek to understand the effects of the situational and contextual factors that affect leadership effectiveness. These researchers assume that behaviors exhibited by leaders depend upon the situational requirements arising from the circumstances in which the leader is leading. However, despite the move towards a contingency, transformational, or multifaceted approach to the study of leadership, “the focus on leadership behavior...has remained a common theme in the literature” (Fernandez, 2008).

In his 2003 review of the public sector, leadership literature, Van Wart found that only a handful of public sector leadership articles were written in the last six decades. The trends noted by Van Wart were that up until the 1990s, leadership in the public sector was generally regarded as an “executive phenomenon,” and that there were very few empirical studies of leadership. Hence

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