

Occasional paper no. 3

Public sector leadership:
Moving beyond mythology

Paul 't Hart
Utrecht University

states**services**authority



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Contact us at:

ANZSOG
email: anzsog@anzsog.edu.au
phone: +61 3 8344 1990
fax: +61 3 9349 5849

Postal Address:

PO Box 4023
Parkville
Victoria 3052
Australia

Web address:

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Contact us at:

State Services Authority
Email: info@ssa.vic.gov.au
Phone: +61 3 9651 1321
Fax: +61 3 9651 0747

Postal Address:

3 Treasury Place
Melbourne
Victoria 3002
Australia

Web address:

www.ssa.vic.gov.au

Published: May 2009

Series foreword

The Australia and New Zealand School of Government and the State Services Authority are collaborating on a partnership that draws together a broad network of policy-makers, practitioners and leading academics.

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About the author

Paul 't Hart is professor of Political Science at the Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, and professor of Public Administration at the Utrecht School of Governance, Utrecht University, The Netherlands. A former associate dean of the Netherlands School of Government, he currently convenes and teaches the leadership course in ANZSOG's Executive Master of Public Administration program.

Paul has published 25 books and over 150 articles and chapters on issues of public leadership, crisis management, public policy and public accountability. His forthcoming book is: *Public Leadership: Perspectives and Practices* (co-edited with John Uhr, ANZSOG/ANU E Press, September 2008). He has extensive teaching, training and consulting experience in the Dutch and Australian public sectors.

'Leadership' is routinely admired, vilified, ridiculed, invoked, trivialised, explained and speculated about in media discourse and everyday conversation. Yet despite all this talk on the subject, surprisingly little consensus exists on how to answer some of the basic questions about the nature, place, role and impact of leadership in contemporary society. Calls for 'more', 'better', 'genuine', 'transformational' or 'authentic' leadership are often heard from those in politics and government. But what do they really want? How realistic are their expectations? Who should heed them? What can we learn from these pleas?

Leadership talk fits the times. It epitomises contemporary individualism. The topic provides even the most dispassionate and bland bureaucrat with persuasive stories about real-life 'heroes'. The resourceful people (the dynamic, wise, persistent, proactive and the entrepreneurial) who can transform ineffective, wasteful or unethical organisations, or turn good ideas into enormously profitable endeavours.

As with any success story, one needs to question: is it all true? The answer here is yes and no. Yes, there are kernels of truth in many of these stories. When Lee Iacocca or Bill Gates talk about their own leadership experiences, they are not fabricating—ample evidence to demonstrate their success as leaders exists in the public domain. When Goleman (2002) and his coworkers find that a high level of emotional intelligence correlates with certain forms leadership success, they are onto something. On the other hand, many of the sweeping claims of contemporary leadership talk are debatable. What then are some of the problems with current leadership discourse?

Firstly, modern leadership-speak talks down 'management' as dull and unimaginative store-minding. While deeming it good enough for less dynamic times, this notion oddly dismisses the '50s, '60s, '70s and '80s as periods of stability, when management rather than 'leadership' was the buzzword, and managers were hot property in professionalising governance. Leadership 'gurus' and programs direct public officials to look at themselves, improve their skills and competencies, and assert themselves in new ways to create public value. Real leaders clean house, innovate and reform, we are told. And so they do. With their MBAs and MPAs, they assume their elevated positions and practise what they have been programmed to do—effect change. In the public sector context, with its pivotal need for reliability and continuity in service delivery, this can prove problematic.

Chris Pollitt (2007) tells the tragic-comic tale of the permanent 'dis-reorganization' of the British National Health Service brought about by a succession of reform-focused leaders. Pollitt documents how the relentless waves of reform—new ones being announced before their predecessors had run their course—resulted in organisational introversion, loss of institutional memory, staff demotivation, and precious little improvement in service delivery to customers. That tale strikes a familiar chord with many of us working in and observing major public organisations. We are in danger of reorganising ourselves to death, largely because people in charge of organisations are conditioned—by their socialisation and incentive structures as 'leaders'—to think that this is their role as a leader.

Secondly, focusing on success through the power of leadership promotes a Platonic view of government, where wisdom resides at the top. We, however, live in an era of horizontalisation, citizen empowerment and power through hybrid networks rather than governmental hierarchies. The key challenge for today's politicians and public officials is not simply how to lead, but how to remain relevant when open borders, critical and discerning citizens, complex dependencies and self-conscious professionals continuously challenge centralised power. Contemporary public leadership theory and practice should focus as much on shaping senior office-holders to be effective collaborators, partners and negotiators as on strengthening their abilities to be direction setters, decision makers and change agents.

Thirdly, where are the empirical foundations for much of the 'how-to' leadership prescriptions that have flooded the market for more than a decade? I am amazed by the fervour with which people advocate their preferred conception of leadership. Entrepreneurial leadership, transformational leadership, coaching leadership, servant leadership, empowerment leadership and charismatic leadership. These slogans and catchphrases abound in the titles of the books that pack the business section shelves of major bookstores. It seems that every time you look, another author has coined a new leadership adjective, along with its own philosophy, model, success stories or other corroborating evidence, and the inevitable maxims, lessons and 'how-to' tips. Good science is cumulative; its students today possess a common language, a set of shared assumptions, and above all a widely-accepted body of robust empirical knowledge produced by their predecessors. Not so in the world of leadership studies, where people cannot even agree on basic definitional issues.

There are multiple notions of leadership in the market place. Semantics leads the way to professional advancement over patient testing and retesting of promising propositions. Such a field is essentially footloose. With the prospect of considerable financial gain for the writer of the next 'in' book, the subject is prone to hype. Gurus thrive while many leadership scholars see their books gather dust on warehouse shelves. Success in this field is certainly not the product of scientific rigour.

Most of the guru books on leadership are of two kinds. The first is written by a current or former successful leader who urges their reader to act exactly as they did—a lesson of debatable value given the highly contextual nature of leadership situations and niches. The second kind is written by a leadership scholar or observer who has deduced leadership principles from teaching courses, interviewing people and reading books. What do they share? Neither of them has ever bothered to seriously test their leadership prescriptions in a variety of contexts and settings. They each make the same mistake of overgeneralising.

Falling in love with your own professional successes and your own model is easy to do. Believe me, I know—I have been there. Essentially, it is intellectual hubris. Peters and Waterman's *In Search of Excellence* was impressive in 1982, and it remains a sensible and eminently readable collection of stories about successful firms. Yet when most of their 'excellent' companies came crashing down within years of the book's publication, their recipes rapidly lost their appeal. As any serious scientist will tell you, reliable knowledge comes from testing, re-testing, and testing again. Why do we ignore this when it comes to knowledge claims in the area of management and leadership?

The gulf between guru-style and empirically sound leadership studies is vast. Writers of the latter are plentiful, yet attract much less attention than the gurus. They overwhelmingly offer messages of caution when it comes to embracing leadership prescriptions. The simple fact is that the power of leadership in explaining outcomes of complex organisations and policy networks is difficult to determine. More often than not, however, that power is quite limited. Yet we are blinded by the heroic aura of the laccoccas, Trumps and Giulianis of this world, and we are seduced by the guru's often brilliant writing style. But why is it that those who have been at the vanguard of leadership studies for decades—scholars including James McGregor Burns, Robert House, Erwin Hargrove, James Gardner, Fred Greenstein and Margaret Hermann—refrain from espousing pet metaphors and simple sets of maxims? Serious scholars make their readers aware of the contingencies, predicaments and constraints of leadership, and know better than to simply tell them what to do.

I do believe that we need people who are skilful, wise, reflective, entrepreneurial and empathic in the upper ranks of the public sector. I also believe in nurturing these leadership qualities. However, we are at risk of doing it in the wrong fashion. The countless courses and seminars on leadership suggest that it is all about 'you'—your drive, your skills, your attitudes, your self-

confidence, your communication, your aura and your humility. But as a citizen, I don't want a government built on the shaky foundations of having a few good people at the top.

Government must have a resilient institutional fabric, which fosters an intelligent interplay between holders of various public offices. Good government must maximise opportunities for debate, reflection and reconsideration, and not simply rely on a steady supply of human talent. Public offices and institutions should be made and kept 'idiot-proof' and 'tyrant-resistant'. Even a cursory glance at the history of politics and public administration shows that open, resilient, democratic public institutions are far more important to the quality of government than any effort to groom and select elite of wise individuals to lead the country. I am all for educating public service professionals, since it is the people that make public institutions succeed or fail. We must, however, keep our priorities clear.

We need a self-consciously *public* leadership discourse driven by careful reasoning and sound evidence rather than the slogans and maxims of business sector gurus. This discourse must reflect on not only the personal, but also on the institutional and contextual dimensions of public leadership. Consideration of electoral politics, the politics-administration distinction, the rule of law, ubiquitous accountability requirements, and the growing limits to the power of centralised government must be part of the debate.

I particularly want the future leaders of the public service to be acutely aware that powerful leaders can destroy as much as they create. Leaders of the future should be socialised in a manner that encourages reflection rather than a 'can-do' attitude. We need leaders that eschew change for change's sake, and recognise that the need to conserve certain public values and institutions may often outweigh the imperative to reform or abandon them. We also need a public leadership discourse that neither presumes all wisdom resides at the top, nor tells people they should become superheroes. One that balances attention for individual competencies and personal development with the inculcation of the critical qualities of interdependence, collegiality and collaboration to produce effective public leadership. Fortunately, there is the beginning of such a self-conscious, empirically grounded, and reflective public leadership discourse taking place, which can be drawn upon when devising education and training for senior public sector officials (see the list of recommended reading below).

In summary, we need to put leadership in perspective. More, stronger or 'better' leadership by individuals will *not* remedy the current crisis of public governance in many Western countries. Today, as much as in any other era, we need prudent leaders and strong institutions that ensure the dynamic power leaders can wield is both harnessed and checked.

Highly recommended books for aspiring public service leaders

1. Boin, A, t'Hart, P, Stern, E & Sundelius, B 2005, *The politics of crisis management: Public leadership under pressure*, Cambridge University Press, New York.
2. Heifetz, R 1994, *Leadership without easy answers*, Belknap Harvard Press, Massachusetts.
3. Lord, C 2003, *The modern prince: What leaders need to know now*, Yale University Press, New Haven.
4. MacGregor Burns, J 1978, *Leadership*, Harper & Row, New York.
5. Machiavelli, N 1984, *The prince*, Bantam Classics.
6. Selznick, P 1984, *Leadership in administration*, University of California Press, California.
7. Skowronek, S 1997, *The politics presidents make: Leadership from John Adams to Bill Clinton*, Belknap Harvard Press, Massachusetts.
8. Skowronek, S 2008, *Presidential leadership in political time: Reprise and reappraisal*, Kansas University Press, Kansas.
9. Terry, L 1995, *Leadership of public bureaucracies: The administrator as conservator*, Sage.
10. Uhr, J 2005, *Terms of trust: Arguments over ethics in Australian government*, University of NSW Press, Sydney.
11. Walter, J & Strangio, P 2007, *No Prime Minister: Reclaiming politics from leaders*, University of NSW Press, Sydney.

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- Pollitt, C 2007, 'New Labour's re-disorganization: Hyper-modernism and the costs of reform', *Public Management Review*, vol. 9, issue 4, pp. 529 – 543.