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Public Policy
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The Qualities of Leadership in The Public Sector

Thomas Clarke
IPPG Policy Paper 5

IPPG Occasional Policy Paper Series

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September 2025

Published by University of Technology Sydney,

PO Box 123 Broadway NSW 2007 Australia

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ISBN 978-1-7635824-4-6

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Introduction

Leadership is recognized as a significant foundation of the public sector. The success or failure of any public enterprise is often associated with the vision and strength of the leadership involved. Leadership is a complex and multi-dimensional phenomenon. Effective leadership is widely recognized as a key to the success of an organization (Benmira and Agboola 2021). “Effective leadership is integral to organizational effectiveness. Effective leaders create positive organizational cultures, strengthen motivation, clarify mission and organizational objectives, and steer organizations to more productive and high outcomes” (Ingraham and Gotha-Taylor 2004:95).

The exercise of political leadership has proved the source of endless fascination since the dawn of civilization (Rhodes and Hart 2014; Goodwin, Moran, and Rein 2008). Arguably, public leadership is more needed in the present era than ever before, to manage multiple crises of environment, economy, health, and population, to mention just a few ongoing and compounding global issues. There has rarely been a time when vision, courage and truthfulness – among the most essential elements of leadership – were simultaneously the most in demand, and yet the most threatened of the qualities of public servants. David Schmidchen accurately captures the present painful *zeitgeist* of the times for leadership of the public sector:

“The public service ideal of being ‘frank and fearless’ meets its toughest test in today’s political climate. History, literature and leadership collide in this quiet reckoning. When truth becomes dangerous what kind of leadership becomes possible? Today it seems truth is optional, facts are dismissed as ‘fake news,’ history is rewritten to serve the few, and leaders speak in slogans. In an era where appearance is valued more than authenticity the frank and fearless public servant can seem like a relic of a gentler and distant time... ‘Truth is optional’ is a worldview of government issuing from Trump’s United States – where a narrative of power is rampant...” (2025:1)

The Distinctive Qualities of Leadership in the Public Sector

In contemplating the qualities of public sector leadership, historically there was a tendency to make direct (and often disparaging) comparisons between the entrepreneurial leadership of the private sector, and the more constrained leadership found in the public sector. However exercising leadership in public sector organizations is necessarily very different from leading private companies, due the exigencies of democratic accountability. There are significant differences in job complexity, role clarity, and job autonomy that explain why public sector leaders employ more participative approaches, while private sector leaders often adopt more directive leadership (Hansen and Villadsen 2010). In an extensive survey of the literature of perceptual and behavioural differences between public and private sector managers by Boye et al 2022, discovered among the most significant differences confronted by most public officials in many countries are:

- A more complex stakeholder environment
- Stricter accountability demands
- More ambiguous goals
- Less autonomy
- Different and more demanding values.

Boye et al (2022) conclude that it is time to go beyond a dichotomous difference/no difference debate on public and private sector management and focus upon the substantive contextual factors and behavioral effects in the two different sectors.

Certainly, the administrative context in which public sector managers operate is markedly different from their counterparts in the market sector. The demands of the marketplace in which private sector managers work are widely understood, but the administrative apparatus of government is also a complex and

demanding context in which to work, with leadership by both elected politicians and non-elected civil servants. For example, in the United States:

“The bifurcated administrative model created by placing elected and appointed officials, as well as senior leaders from the career bureaucracy at the top of many public organizations. This pattern is most notable in the US federal government (Ingraham, 1995) but has important parallels in state and local government as well. Split leadership, combined with democratic accountability, oversight procedures created by courts and legislatures, and intense media attention, creates an environment for public sector leaders that is constrained in many complex ways” (Ingraham and Gotha-Taylor 2004:96).

There are similar counter-balanced governing structures in many democratic countries, with the political leadership subject to periodic election, but the parallel administrative structure based on proficiency, experience, qualification and often lengthy service in government. Ideally this provides a balance between the ideals and policies of elected politicians in defining reforms, while counterbalanced by the experience and expertise of the administrative leadership in delivering policy outcomes.

Though great importance is attributed to the significance of leadership, there is a long and ongoing debate on what leadership *actually is* in the market sector, but more fundamental discussion in the public sector of what the concept of leadership is. There are many definitions and theories of leadership ranging from the *cerebral* to the *motivational*, and on rare occasions the quite *bizarre* (Elon Musk is not alone!). In the mainstream literature, Kouzes and Posner (1995) offer a compelling motivational definition that “leadership is the art of mobilizing others to want to struggle for shared aspirations.”

The Development of Leadership in the Public Sector

While the definition of leadership is highly contested in both the public and private sectors, there is a general consensus on the need to *develop* leadership – in whatever skills might be considered relevant in different contexts. A great deal of time and expense was devoted to the training and development of leadership abilities in the public sector in recent decades including programs with a range of concepts and goals including for example training programs for senior executives in the US and other countries from the 1970s onwards to educate people in core competencies of leadership such as:

- Leading change
- Leading people
- Being results driven
- Employing business acumen
- Building coalitions and communication
(Ingraham and Gotha-Taylor 2004:97)

As multiple concepts of leadership and training programs were developed and competed through different eras, it was increasingly appreciated that there is no one best way to develop leadership for different contexts and demands. Enthusiasm for different methodologies for leadership development has waxed and waned including for example 360-degree feedback, distance learning programs, off-site training programs, and rotational work assignments (London 2002).

“Conceptions of leadership have changed markedly over time impacting upon leader attraction, development, and retention efforts in both the public and private sectors. Heroic, charismatic, solitary leadership, although still important for some organizations and for some kinds of organizational action, is being replaced by a more team-oriented style and perspective. Although advocated for some time in theory and popular leadership literature, the reality of creating team-based leadership in a still hierarchical and rigid organization is a challenging one....This demonstrates the idea of integrative leadership, that is, of leadership that necessarily creates and utilizes an institutional base that is more encompassing and longer term than the single leader model can provide” (Ingraham, Sowa, & Moynihan, 2004).

Entrepreneurial leadership models also began to make their mark in the public sector. Numerous researchers have noted that there is increasing evidence of innovative or entrepreneurial leadership behaviour by employees located at all levels of public organizations—and this phenomenon has been linked to enhanced public sector effectiveness (Borins, 2000; Sanders, 1998; Thompson, 1998). Entrepreneurial leaders have a strong motivation to “make a difference” and work to do so with determination and optimism (Doig & Hargrove, 1990). These individuals look for opportunities to forge their own direction, despite strong central organizational control. Forging their own way, said Rainey (1997), impels these individuals to connect with broader political and social trends (Ingraham and Gotha-Taylor 2004).

Understanding and explaining the qualities of notable government leaders has proved a subject of endless fascination through the ages, ranging from pet theories to grand historical treatise on the leaders on the international stage often intended to canonize the leader in question – think of Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal; Winston Churchill and the Battle of Britain; General de Gaul and the restoration of France; Mahatma Gandhi and the unification of India; John F. Kennedy and Civil Rights; Mao Tse Tung and the rebirth of China; Gough Whitlam and the progressive reform of Australia with universal health care and free university education.

The Downside of Leadership

If great leadership is often associated with epoch changing policies, and huge achievements for the public good, it is also important to remember the catastrophic harm that bad leaders can cause: Hitler and fascism; Stalin and the Gulags; Mao Tse Tung and the Cultural Revolution (notice Mao gets a mention in both the good and bad leader category – he gave hope and national reunification to China, then stripped away the people’s freedom); Pinochet and the suppression of Chile; Kim Il Sung the enslaver of North Korea; Pol Pot who decimated the Cambodian population; Donald Trump and the vulgar debasement of the American constitution. Each of these leaders possessed dangerous charisma, and were enslaving ideologues, with immense capacity for cruelty.

Fortunately, such demagogues blight countries rarely (though they often seem to hang around for a long time, as invariably they dismember the democratic process, and can found dynasties that linger painfully). It is more often noticed that essentially good leaders may develop weaknesses accompanying their evident strengths. Being a long-standing leader, while forging vital resilience and important capabilities, can encourage personality traits that are less admirable including endless vanity, and an incapacity to listen carefully to others. Sometimes the public is aware of leaders’ failings but forgive them due to admiration for what the leaders have achieved. On other occasions the weaknesses of leaders are systemically concealed from the public, as in the sad decline of President Biden, who’s great contribution to the recovery of the American economy during both the 2008 global financial crisis as Vice President, and then picking up the pieces after the first Trump Presidency in 2020, setting the US on a constructive path towards net zero emissions, and reconstructing the US post-Covid, was in the end overshadowed by the concealment from the public of his sad personal health decline while still in office. A common failing of leaders is to cling on to power long after it is wise to do so. On the other hand, very capable leaders can become disillusioned with brutal political processes and leave public service too early feeling they have done enough, as perhaps in the case of Julia Gillard in Australia.

Theories of Leadership

Contemporary theories of leadership have progressed through many stages in the last two hundred years. Benmira and Agboola (2021) have offered four main historical eras for the development of leadership theories:

- *Great Man and Trait Era*
- *Behavioural Era*
- *Situational Era*
- *New Leadership Era*

Great Man and Trait Era

The *Great Man* theory and *Trait* theories of the 19th and early 20th centuries focused upon the innate characteristics of a leader, identifying personal traits as distinctive qualities of effective leaders. In the earlier *Great Man* theory of leadership that lasted for many centuries – the belief is essentially leaders are born rather than trained. The presupposition is only a few leaders possess the relevant unique characteristics for leadership, and it is divine intention that they should lead, for example Julius Caesar or Napoleon Bonaparte who captivated their empires with their brilliance. In contrast *Trait* theory accepts that leaders can be born or *made*: that is the traits to lead can be inherited or developed over time. However, trait theory was never able to establish a definitive and lasting set of essential traits for leadership in a rapidly changing world.

Behavioural Era

Behavioural theories of leadership put emphasis upon the exercise of certain learnt behaviours as ensuring effective leadership. Different patterns of behaviour were defined as leadership styles. This approach is associated with leadership training programs that emphasize developing leadership skills and behaviours.

Kurt Lewin in the 1930s was an early exponent of a behavioural theory of leadership, who identified three distinctive leadership behaviours along a continuum (Table 1) (Adelman 1993):

Table 1. Lewin Continuum of Leadership Behaviours

<i>AUTOCRATIC</i>	<i>PARTICIPATIVE</i>	<i>LAISSEZ-FAIRE</i>
Directs and controls all activities without meaningful participation by members of the team	Encourages the group to participate but retains the final say over the decision-making process	Asks for the task to be completed but gives meaningful participation and authority to group members to determine how this might be achieved

The appropriateness of a leadership style was determined by the task in hand, though also the approach of the leadership. The circumstances surrounding a particular task may change unpredictably necessitating a change in leadership behaviour. In reality most tasks relate to other tasks, and different leadership styles will apply to each, moreover leaders often choose to mix leadership styles, sometimes necessarily, but other times arbitrarily, and this adds to the complexity of understanding behavioural situations. Unsurprisingly perhaps, research indicates most leaders utilized some elements of each of Lewin's leadership approaches in different contexts.

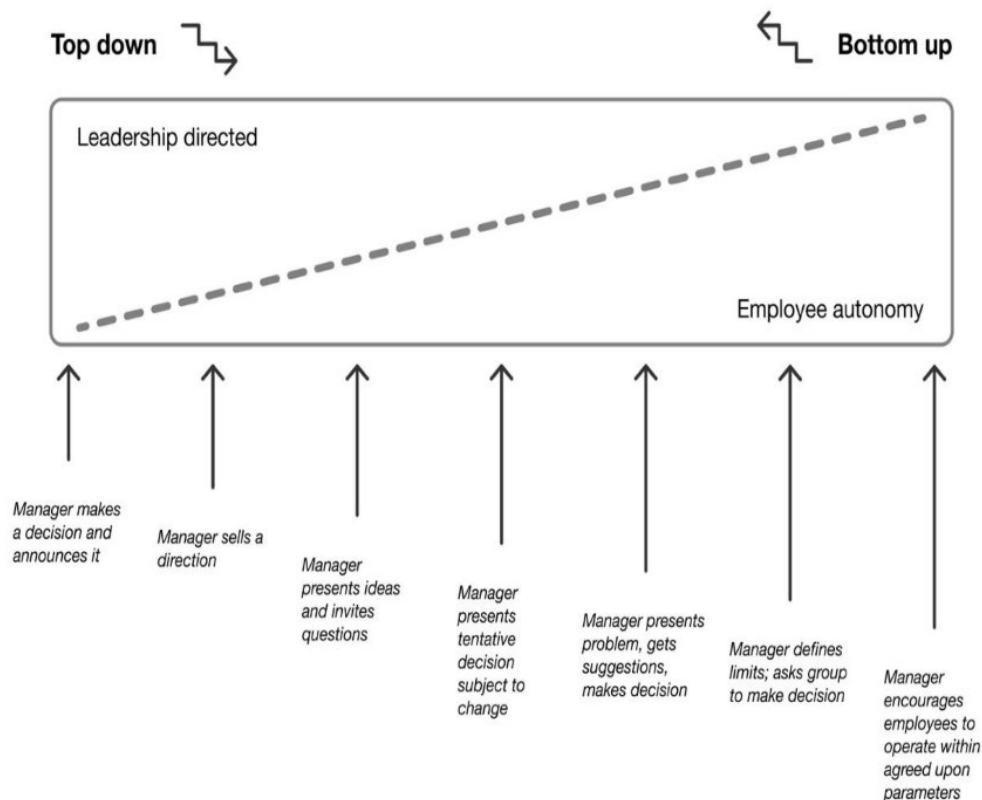
Situational Era

A subsequent theory developed in the 1960s recognized the role environment has in leader / follower behaviour. Leaders are best able to assess the environmental context and decide on an appropriate style of leadership that works in this environment. Four primary styles of leadership are recognized as relevant in different circumstances: telling, selling, participating and delegating. The more autocratic *telling* is necessary when people are inexperienced, or for some reason unwilling to do what is required: while the appropriateness of this approach may often be questioned, in extreme circumstances it is inevitable, as in emergencies where time is of the essence, and lives may be at stake. *Selling* is a motivational approach aimed at convincing people they have the capability to do a task. *Participating* is a step towards a more democratic approach, involving people in the decision-making around what needs to be done. *Delegating* occurs where it is believed people have both the ability and willingness to complete a task (Zalani 2019).

As style depends on situation, this is called the contingency theory of leadership. “Contingency theory assumes that leaders are either task-oriented or relationship-oriented. Task-oriented leaders assign tasks, set deadlines, and follow structural processes. Relationship-oriented leaders focus on people and are considerate” (Zalani 2019). Tannenbaum and Schmidt (2003) demonstrate a continuum of behaviours from top-down leadership to the freedom of work groups to make their own decisions on tasks (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Tannenbaum and Schmidt Continuum of Leadership

Behaviours: From Leadership Directed to Work Group Autonomy



The New Public Sector Management

The development of leadership theory in the public sector as presented by Bemira and Agboola (2021) is as a relatively benign transformation of management ideas and styles to meet the demands of more complex and fast changing economies and societies. But in both the market sector and in the public sector from the 1970s onwards there were more fundamental and often destructive drivers of structural economic and organisational change (within which more elegant and responsible management theories often were constrained and had to work).

Essentially these changes were driven by a sense that the apparently endless post second world war period of economic recovery and expansion had come to an end: the economic fortunes of countries with heightened international competition became more unpredictable. These fundamentals were essentially market driven around intensive financialisation of markets and societies (Krippner 2005). Increasingly powerful international financial investment institutions demanded greater shareholder value, which involved continuous waves of mergers, restructures and takeovers in the market sector, with severe market and firm rationalisation, and often mass closures and redundancies over the decades from the 1970s through to the present century. This was often presented as the costs of economic and technological advance. However though new technologies did have a central part to play, the pace and

objectives of rationalisation were more about profit maximisation than the implications of technological progress.

In this context of apparently rapid economic and business change in the private sector, state bodies were not spared a more demanding, and from some quarters unrelenting, assessment of:

- Operating environment and strategic objectives
- Organizational structures and processes
- Performance management and measurement systems
- Management and managers
- Employees performance
- Corporate culture
(Defienbach 2009; Clarke 1994)

In the context of this robust, and sometimes ruthless assessment of their management and performance, and relatively declining public revenues, the public sector was forced frequently towards reduced funding and harsher performance targets for organisations remaining within the public sector, and often to the random privatization of vital state assets (privatizations that often never succeeded in their stated purpose). In the UK where Mrs Thatcher initiated the international wave of privatizations, after decades of poor outcomes from privatised companies, now the water and rail companies are being prepared for renationalization. Acutely, in the case of the water companies there was evidence that profits (and executive bonuses) were being preserved, as the quality and safety of the public water supply was systemically neglected (GOV.UK 2025).

Reconceiving the Public Sector

The history of the public sector is one of gradual and consistent government intervention to remedy the failures of the market in essential aspects of economic and

social provision. From the 1970s onwards there was growing interest in market intervention to redress the failures of the state. The experience of the apparently inexorable growth of the state in the 20th century in response to greater and more complex public demands was brought abruptly to a halt with reductions in public expenditure, privatisation and deregulation of public enterprise, and the introduction of market mechanisms, in the UK, and subsequently adopted in other economies including Australia.

However, much attention was also focused on how to make the remaining public sector more efficient and accountable. Part of this process involved a rethinking of the role of the public sector, as an effective enabler not necessarily a direct provider. Reinventing government in this way it was suggested provides the basis of a more effective and acceptable government sector, with a shift in organisational culture from inward looking to mission driven and results oriented government (Osborne and Gaebler 1992; Lan and Rosenbloom 1992).

"During the post war boom, a broad political consensus had existed on the mutually supportive roles of the public and private sectors in a mixed economy in which private production was supported by Keynesian economic management and a welfare state. But in the 1980s the public sector, public expenditure and public services came to be seen as antagonistic to economic regeneration, particularly in the influential arguments of the New Right" (Geddes 1991: 7).

The national policies of the Thatcher and Reagan governments, subsequently emulated by many others, were aimed to free capital and diminish its social obligations (Hambleton 1992: 9). A range of methods were employed vigorously to diminish the scale, influence and cost of public sector activity:

- Privatisation
- Delegation
- Competition
- Enterprise
- Deregulation
- Service quality
- Curtailment of trade union powers (Thomson 1992).

The sense of a necessary sea change in priorities received widespread support: governments it was urged must be less profligate in their demands upon resources, and more effective in managing the limited resources available, as accurately de-picted by Metcalfe and Richards: " 'Rolling back the frontiers of the state' was a colourful expression of the belief that government should get off the backs of its citizens and taxpayers and that every effort should be made to give incentives to private sector wealth creation as against public sector wealth consumption." (1990: 1).

Reforming the Public Sector

Public dissatisfaction with the "can't do" culture of the public sector previously was a theme frequently referred to by those busy dismantling state provision. The great achievement of the welfare state in eradicating the scourges of poverty, unemployment, disease, homelessness, and illiteracy in many industrial countries, was forgotten as the public sector became associated with queues, shabby service and remote officials.

For a long-suffering public, management reform of the public sector was long overdue: "The new attention to responsiveness is long awaited and important" (Goss 1991: 27).

"It was easy to find examples of public services which were badly run, where people had to waste half a day for a ten-minute interview, which they left feeling resigned to failure to secure the service they required. Yet the people in question were often the most vulnerable in society, the sick, unemployed, or poor, who felt powerless to complain and kept quiet" (Ross 1991: 18).

Early attempts at reform often failed. In the US administrative changes were seldom followed by systematic efforts to assess their effects, and often became a source of frustration and ridicule, yet persistently would be resurrected (March and Olsen 1983: 282). Governments were usually overwhelmed by the short-term consideration of survival, to seize the opportunity for a determined reform of the public sector. In some countries the civil service was deeply sceptical about the possibility of effective restructuring of government and imbued with the belief that all reforms were either cosmetic, short-lived or ill-conceived and bound to fail (Metcalfe and Richards 1990: 19). (One of the most famous British television programs during this period was a BBC farce about the civil service *Yes, Minister*. Of course, these words, issued by a top civil servant with a slightly pained reluctance, always in effect ultimately meant "*No, Minister!*")

As Caiden suggested:

“Administrative reform has gone through a sobering if not disillusioning period in which political realities overshadowed administrative niceties, the models it embraced collapsed altogether or did not meet the new political realities, and its practitioners groped and improvised as best they could with crisis management... There has been a decided loss of innocence, not just because of bitter experiences in trying to improve public sector performance, but because the world has moved on ... A different world requires different kinds of reform, different reform strategies and different reform outcomes” (1991: 13).

Catalysts of Transformation of the Public Sector

New forces for change have acted as a catalyst in transforming much of public sector provision over recent decades:

- The insistent interventions of impatient government politicians
- New demands created by social change
- Transformed thinking about the nature of effective management
- Heightened consumer awareness
- Much tighter financial controls
- Closer external scrutiny of spending and performance
- Renewed commitments to quality in public service delivery
- Encouragement of a climate of improved performance.

In recent decades traditional public sector practices have been successfully challenged, and a convincing change in orientation has taken place:

- From an emphasis on internal procedures to a concern for outcomes;
- From an emphasis on hierarchical decision-making to an approach stressing delegation and personal responsibility;
- From a focus on the quantity of service provided to one also concentrating on quality;
- From a culture that values stability and uniformity to one that cherishes innovation and diversity (Hambleton 1992: 10).

Before there was what Metcalfe and Richards refer to as an impoverished conception of management in the public sector: thinking of management as an executive function with a clear definition of objectives; management as an intra-organisational process concerned with internal routines and procedure; coordination and control achieved through well-defined hierarchies; and that these broad principles would apply with minor adaptation to all forms of organisation:

“These elements in combination impose severe restrictions on the scope of management. They limit the role of public managers to programmed implementation of predetermined policies. They disregard the problem of adapting policies and organisations to environmental change. If this is all management means, giving more weight to it is likely to cause confusion and frustration rather than lead to long term improvements in performance... Civil servants need a richer and more precise language for diagnosing complex management problems and developing workable solutions to them” (Metcalfe and Richards 1990: 17, 22).

In the absence of a more creative and dynamic approach, the critics of the public sector are free to equate cutting expenditure with efficiency gains, assuming greater productivity is the only realisable management goal.

The new wave of management thinking in the public sector possesses:

- an explicit emphasis on the management of change
- with the object of a metamorphosis in organisation culture,
- improving the quality of service
- moving the locus of managerial authority and budgetary responsibility from the policy centre closer to the point of delivery
- getting closer to the public and attempting to shift the balance of power in favour of those who the organisation is intended to serve.

This emphasis on listening to the customer, and delegating as much decision-making as possible to the operational level, has achieved positive results (Thomson 1992; Ham-bleton 1992). The public sector is changing in many countries. "In order to survive, local government has had to develop a stronger sense of strategic leadership, an increased emphasis on performance, quality, and better financial management and a greater concern for the consumers of local services" (Buckland and Joshua 1992:21).

Yet after decades of proactive reform and regeneration of public sector policy and provision internationally, the public sector often remains subjected to older stereotypes, and ill-informed critiques regarding the dynamic superiority of private sector managers relative to their public sector counterparts. The persuasiveness of this ongoing critique has often meant that external private consulting firms have been preferred to internal public sector managers on key contracts. Indeed, continuing myths regarding the lack of leadership and visionary qualities in the public sector has proved a key tool of private consultants in winning large public sector contracts.

A related mythology is that of the 'miracle managers' from the private sector (or homegrown in the public sector), who are capable of rapid and radical transformatory leadership in relatively short amounts of time – sweeping away the bureaucracy and stasis of the past, and replacing this with a focused energy and dynamic capability. The presumption that quick wins in the public sector can be achieved with such interventions by inspired leadership is often an expression of the self-interest and careerism of the managers and consultancies in question, rather than part of a sustained effort to achieve lasting change.

The Mythology of Miracle Managers

Almost all leaders will spend some time massaging a mythology around their leadership. This can prove a relatively harmless conceit, or quite damaging if the mythology detracts from the hard work of building effective and sustainable teams of productive managers.

The practice (and sometimes mythology) of miracle working, pacesetting, managers consists of:

- A belief that complex problems can be cracked when you bring together visionary leadership and high performance teams;
- Used selectively to complete specific goals this can prove an effective method for accomplishing complex tasks and projects of high importance;
- Providing the right team and leader can be found without undermining other vital work of the organisation (Turley 2025).

But if expected to work at speed or on multiple projects over time the problems arise of:

- Employee burnout
- Crumbling corporate culture
- Leadership stress

A problem is that pace setting leadership often simply does not have the time to:

- Build corporate culture
- Train employees
- Develop teams
- Provide training

Yet all of these processes are essential for organizational continuity and performance. It is counter-productive to achieve one miracle project, if this undermines the performance of the rest of the public organization.

The reality is that the miracles of pace setting managers do not work without:

- Clearly defined parameters, responsibilities and standards
- The time to assemble solid teams motivated and interested by the project
- A clear vision of the objective and how team members may contribute (Turley 2025).

Of course, none of this connects very well with Elon Musk's recent "move fast and break things" excursion into the US Federal Government with his DOGE (Department of Government Efficiency) team. The results of his unbridled energy remain in some doubt in government, as a brief bout of intense day and night activity ended in a great deal of chaos, and Musk's early departure from government, leaving others to pick up the wreckage and to restore some sense of direction.

Elon Musk's Reinvention of Macho-Management

Yet behind the many conceits of techno-imperialism, at the start of the second Trump Presidency in 2024 Musk was able with the blunt instrument of young DOGE zealots to begin the wrecking of well-founded Washington-based US government institutions including the US Agency for International Development (USAID), Health and Human Services, the US Postal Service, Social Security Administration, Department of Defense, Internal Revenue Service, National Institutes of Health, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, NASA, and the Department of Education (Goodwin 2025). Confronted by behaviour that was often little short of thuggish, these vital institutions of American democracy were subjected to immediate mass redundancies, the loss of their leadership, and structural reductions in their funding which were intended to make them sharply constrict their activities. This was not far-sighted management of government for the future, it was more of an attempt to return to the early 1930s depression when the American people were left to fend for themselves without any form of support or assistance from the US government, in order to save many billions of dollars that were then released to the super-rich in massive tax concessions in the *One Big Beautiful Bill Act* passed by the Trump dominated Congress and signed into law on 5 July 2025.

A Drift Back to Authoritarianism?

Of course, progress was never unilinear or continuous, and in these complex times, there have been frequent reversals in policies and practices, often under the weight of external contingencies. Sadly, across the world dictatorship seems to be coming back into fashion with Putin's reign in Russia now

entering its third decade, President Xi Jinping of China demonstrating increasingly autocratic tendencies in what is becoming the largest economy on earth, Prime Minister Modi in India apparently drifting towards becoming authoritarian in the most populous state, and a wide selection of dictatorships arising in the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Africa, South America and Asia.

The 20th century assumption of an endless global progress towards intelligent and informed democratic practice has been shattered, particularly by Donald Trump's ascendance to a vulgar second Imperial Presidency in the United States, and his wayward and chaotic attempt at influence across the governments of the rest of world (with his childlike understanding and constantly changing application of international tariffs). Tragically Trump's nonsensical '*art of the deal*' has become the idiotic standard for the rhetoric of international diplomacy (once apparently so sophisticated and now often so crass).

(In truth Donald Trump had failed in almost all of the companies he attempted to run in his business career including casinos, universities, catering, clothing, social media etc, (and his apparent long success in property development masked a litany of bankruptcies, lawsuits and large unpaid contractor bills). As his niece Mary Trump, (a trained clinical psychologist), concluded from his wayward business career:

"Once Donald moved to Atlantic City there was no longer any denying that he wasn't just ill-suited to the day-to-day grind of running a few dozen middle-class rental properties in the outer boroughs, he was ill-suited to running any kind of business at all – even one that ostensibly played to his strengths of self-promotion and self-aggrandizement and his taste for glitz" (2020:142).

Like many of his businesses, Trump's several casinos in Atlantic City collapsed in bankruptcy (*New York Times* 11 June 2016). A number of Silicon Valley billionaires once accurately suggested if he had simply put his large inheritance from his slum landlord father into the *S & P 500* he would have become a lot richer than all of his supposed 'entrepreneurial' endeavours recouped. Though of course later, (as they lined up for his Second Inauguration in 2024), the same Tech Billionaires were desperate to win President Trump's favour and avoid his damaging intrusion into their global businesses with his facile and counter-productive tariffs, and less than helpful demands on where they should site their production facilities).

More worryingly still, Trump has broken through the critical divide between public state duties and private personal business affairs, and it seems his business interests in international property development, crypto-currency, and media are benefiting considerably from his current status as President of the United States (taking the Presidency for the second time, has provided him with the considerable riches he always craved, but never quite acquired in his business career).

There is a profound alternative to this reckless self-indulgence continuously demonstrated on a daily basis by President Trump. A leadership that has the intelligence and courage to rise to the complex needs of the times, and the empathy to do so with trust and belief in the remarkable qualities of humankind.

The Relevance of Management Theory for Government and Public Sector Leadership?

What can be perceived clearly in the historical progression of management leadership theory, is a reflection of the real-life experience of nations moving from autocracy in their governments and public sectors towards formal democracy, and then on towards more engaging and participatory forms of democracy. The evolution of political forms of governance was originally immersed for thousands of years in the endless, often violent, struggles of hereditary emperors and kings for ascendancy. It has taken the last two hundred years for governments and countries to become committed to more scientific, actual and consistent, demonstration of the knowledge and ability to lead.

Only in recent decades has there proved to be a more exacting and open assessment of relevant leadership skills. (Alex Douglas-Home who served as UK Prime Minister in 1963-4, initially from the House of Lords, at the time was criticized as an aristocrat land- owner, out of touch with the struggles of working people, and was once discovered in his office in 10 Downing Street to be distributing the UK state budget allocations with matchsticks on his desk). More recently in the UK, the premiership of Boris Johnson provided a comic interlude (including during the dire Covid crisis when he himself ended up in intensive care).

Contemporary conceptions of leadership have become progressively more sophisticated in their attempt to understand the increasing complexities of governments and economies. These have encompassed the contingent and transactional nature of government in changing times, the importance of transactional skills and the capacity to engage in transformative missions. Realising that government cannot achieve solutions to complex problems without the active and wide participation of the community and economy, the collaboration and engagement of others becomes vital. In this context participative approaches are seen as vital, and the idea of public service takes on a new resonance and meaning.

There is a profound alternative to the atavistic inclinations towards dictatorship that have recently become prevalent internationally, or the reckless self-indulgence continuously demonstrated on a daily basis by President Trump. A leadership that has the intelligence and courage to rise to the complex needs of the times, and the empathy to do so with trust and belief in the remarkable qualities of humankind.

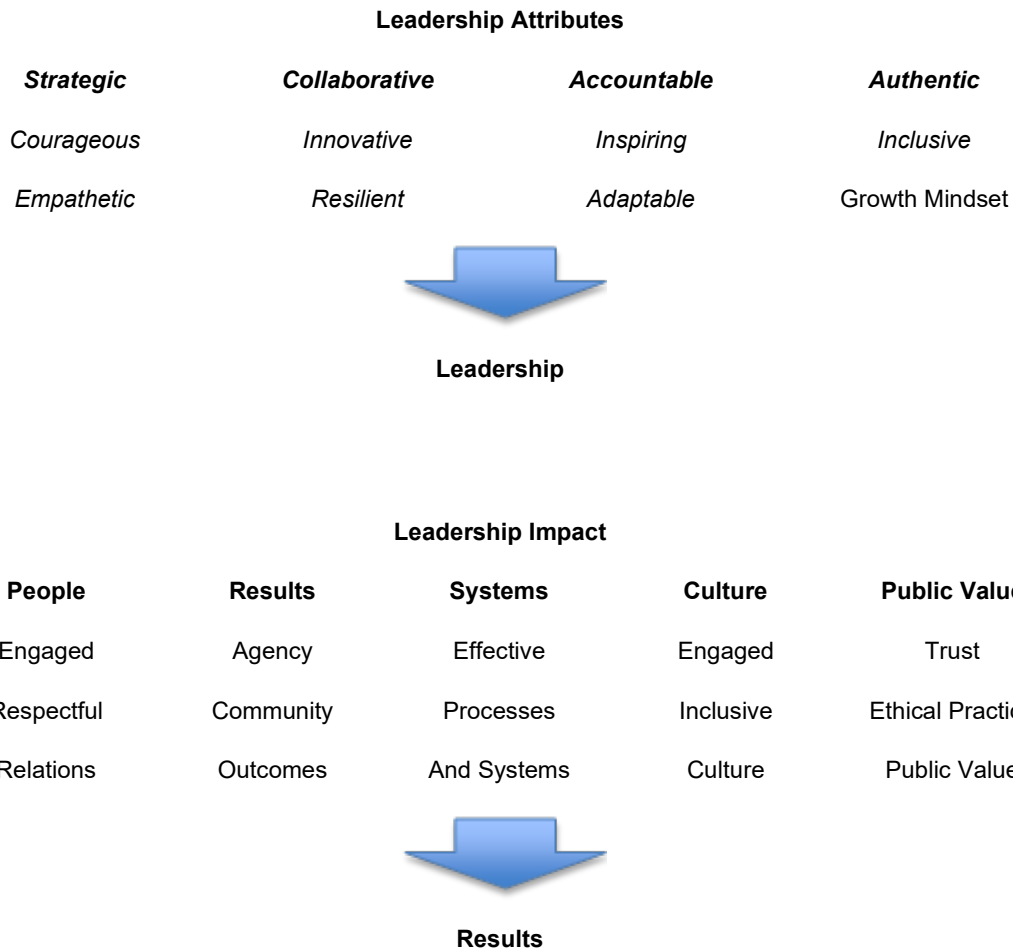
New Approaches to Public Policy Leadership

There are developing new approaches to public policy leadership across the world which are focusing upon “key attributes, mindsets and behaviours needed to successfully lead, empower and inspire others and create a productive working environment” (NSW PSC 2025) Table 2 illustrates one such Public Sector Leadership Framework developed by the New South Wales government in Australia. The Framework supports leaders developing the attributes, mindsets and behaviours required to make a positive impact. Leadership impact areas include people, results, systems, culture and public value (Table 2).

Attributes encourage leaders to be aware of driving in the public interest and focus on goals with the greatest strategic impact. Collaborative orientations encourage teamwork, establishing networks, and thinking of the whole system. Accountability includes taking responsibility for initiatives and encouraging team performance. Authenticity includes honest communication, integrity, and applying the highest standards of ethical behaviour. Courage in leadership involves inviting genuine debate and problem solving, and being able to make difficult decisions, undertake risk assessment, and support bold actions with mitigation strategies.

Leadership also involves the capacity to look for and discover innovative and creative solutions, and openness to ideas, together with the capacity to motivate others in working towards a common vision. Leadership entails respecting diverse backgrounds and ideas, and understanding the motivations and needs of others. Leadership requires calmness, resilience and persistence in the face of challenges, with a focus on well being. Above all in the present times, leadership needs to embrace change and ambiguity and complexity, and be supportive of others through transitions, and to encourage personal growth. The future is one for visionary and strategic leaders who are achievement focused, and capable of making well-balanced decisions (Table 2). New and more open sources of leaders are necessary to avoid the staleness of stereotypical leadership characteristics.

Table 2. Public Sector Leadership Framework



Source Adapted from NSW PSC (2025)

Women Leaders

There are good places to look for sources of leaders with different qualities. One of the greatest weaknesses of leadership theory and practice is the frequent attribution of leadership qualities on what are assumed to be essentially male characteristics. This flies in the face of historical experience where great women leaders have left their mark through the ages (Goethals and Hoyt 2017).

Hatshepsut the Pharaoh of Egypt who lived in 1508-1458 BC, diverted her country from endless adventures in military conquest to a focus on trade, arts and construction. Elizabeth 1 of England from 1559 to 1603 proved one of the greatest European monarchs, ushering in a period of peace, prosperity and art, making peace with France, and defeating the Spanish armada. Catherine the Great of Russia (1729-1796) led the country into the heart of the political and cultural life of Europe, reorganizing the administration and law of a vast country. Negotiating a path through the constant barriers of male institutions and prejudices, women have succeeded in leaving their mark through to the present day (Myers 2025).

And yet the traditional stereotype of leadership as an essentially *masculine* set of traits has lingered through the ages. In a curious *Catch 22* if women demonstrate such traits in abundance they are seen as “too manly.” Traditionally gender stereotypes were almost universally present in the estimation of

leadership qualities: an *agentic/assertive* style was often more valued and traditionally associated with men. A *communal* (expressive, friendly, participative) style was often less valued and was usually associated with women (Applebaum et al 2019).

Eagly and Carli (2007) suggest that traditional managerial effectiveness was seen to be a masculine trait, and the more that a woman exuded those masculine traits, the more she was seen as inappropriate for a leadership role, because it was thought she should not be “too manly”. In leadership roles that go beyond managerial positions, gender stereotypes may be even more present since an agentic/assertive leadership style may be more valued, and more traditionally associated with men, than the communal (expressive, friendly, participative) leadership style, which is usually associated to females. Table 3 lists some examples of the two different styles of leadership.

Table 3. Agentic and Communal Qualities of Leadership

<i>Agentic</i>	<i>Communal</i>
Aggressive	Supportive
Determined	Interpersonal
Competitive	Empathetic
Driven	Friendly
Ambitious	Sensitive
Tough	Compassionate
Independent	Kind
Task focused	Helpful
Political	Gentle
Controlled	Affectionate
Self-reliant	Sympathetic

Source: Adapted from Eagly and Carli (2007)

However, this simplistic dichotomy is increasingly replaced by a more complex understanding of the nature of leadership: “We now know that individuals can be both agentic and communal, or, of course, neither. People who manage to be both communal and agentic are said to be *androgynous*. This suggests a flexible set of interpersonal skills that can be deployed in situations calling for leadership. Both men and women can be communal or agentic or androgynous, or not particularly either communal or agentic” (Goethals and Hoyt 2017).

A more nuanced sense of the nature of leadership is emerging: “Women are not as present in the executive suite as men, due to a number of barriers such as gender stereotypes, skewed evaluations and motherhood. In general, much of the literature has demonstrated that women’s leadership characteristics are shown to be effective and it seems that the existence of both male and female traditional leadership qualities in a working environment is what allows both genders to thrive” (Applebaum et al 2019:1).

The increasingly complex demands of public leadership suggest we should be especially careful in widening the scope of the search for leadership qualities. Yet paradoxically this is the time that a war has been declared by the Trump government upon all Diversity, Equity and Inclusion initiatives (The White House 2025).

Crisis Leadership

One of the demands that appears to be becoming more prevalent in the present uncertain times, is the need for crisis management. In the very worst crises, it is invariably governments that are left to pick up the pieces, (and to make some attempt to put them back together again). The need for government action at times of acute crisis occurs in both the public and private sectors. While the market sector is invariably keen to keep government out of their affairs (unless there is a large-scale disbursement of public funds on offer), at times of crisis private corporations are as ready to turn to government for assistance as are public bodies.

This was amply demonstrated during the great 2007/2008 global financial crises. The largest and richest corporations in the world were quick to call for massive government assistance when they realized they were in serious trouble. Global equity markets lost approximately US\$32 trillion in value since their peak during the financial crisis, which was equivalent to the combined GDP of the G7 countries in 2008. As Kevin Rudd, then Prime Minister of Australia, recorded "The long-serving chairman of the US Federal Reserve Alan Greenspan, conceded in testimony before Congress that his ideological viewpoint was flawed, and that the "whole intellectual edifice" of modern risk management had collapsed" *The Monthly*, February 2009).

In this context, Alistair Darling the UK Chancellor of the Exchequer at the time recorded the panic of international bankers on the 6/7 October 2008: "I had met with Britain's top bankers in the Treasury. They had brought with them into the room an air of desperation... It was reported that Britain's largest banks desperately needed money to stay afloat. Some of them needed capital which they could no longer raise from shareholders.... the whiff of panic result was that bank shares plummeted..."

The following afternoon the Chancellor learned that the Chairman of the Royal Bank of Scotland (that as a result of recent misconceived takeovers, without adequate due diligence, had become one of the largest banks in the world) needed to speak to him urgently on the phone. The Chancellor had a little time to contemplate how many weeks or months there might be to work on a remedy before the banks' collapse? In fact, an hour later the Bank Chairman told the Chancellor the bank was " *going to go bust this afternoon.* And he asked me what we were going to do?" (Darling 2012). Not only is government the lender of last resort in financial crises, government is inevitably the last resort in all global crises: economic, environmental, and health crises.

Government Leadership Through the Global Covid Pandemic Crisis

The global Covid Pandemic Crisis was a signal illustration of the vital significance of government leadership and coordination at a time of international health crisis which dislocated the economies and societies of the world. The opening paragraph of the Australian Governments account of its responsibilities during the Covid crisis make grim reading:

"When the COVID19 pandemic emerged at the start of 2020, governments around the world were ill-prepared to respond to the scale and duration of a crisis that had ramifications for our health systems, our economies and the very function of our societies. Australia was no exception, with preexisting pandemic plans limited in scope and lacking the resources to keep them up to date. None of the plans anticipated that, when faced with the prospect of significant loss of life and an overwhelmed health system, leaders would choose the previously unthinkable to protect their citizens. As a result, we had no playbook for pivotal actions taken during the pandemic, no agreement on who would lead on taking these actions and no regular testing of systems and processes. It is telling that there were no plans for the execution of key measures, such as closing our international borders and enforced quarantine. As a result, the pandemic response was not as effective as it could have been. Despite this lack of planning, Australia fared well relative to other nations that experienced larger losses in human life, health system collapse and more severe economic downturns no agreement on who would lead on taking these actions and no regular testing

of systems and processes. It is telling that there were no plans for the execution of key measures, such as closing our international borders and enforced quarantine. As a result, the pandemic response was not as effective as it could have been.” (Australian Government 2024).

We live in a complex and challenging world. In this context government matters more than ever. The qualities of public leadership matters.

Leadership in a Complex World: A New Leadership Era?

In the more complex and demanding world of recent decades, leadership must be capable of leading in a context of rapid change and disruptive technologies in increasingly globalized markets. This approach moves away from unidirectional, top-down processes, with clear distinctions between leaders and followers. The focus shifts to the complex interactions between leaders, followers and the systemic changes occurring (Mumford 2000). This emphasis on new leaders recognizes explicitly the latent leadership capacities of followers (Benmira and Agboola 2021;).

In this profoundly changed context of rapidly advancing technologies compounding complex economic and social development, leadership is confronted by a dramatic series of new and insistent challenges that required the capacity of everyone, not just the leaders, to lead:

“For the first time, it was recognised that focusing on one aspect or dimension of leadership cannot address all the complexity of the phenomenon. In a world that has become more complex and challenging, a need emerged for leadership theories that support circumstances of rapid change, disruptive technological innovation and increasing globalisation. This led to the new leadership era, moving away from the traditional theories of leadership, which define leadership as a unidirectional, top-down influencing process, drawing a distinct line between leaders and followers. Instead, the focus became on the complex interactions among the leader, the followers, the situation and the system as a whole, with particular attention dedicated to the latent leadership capacities of followers” (Benmira and Agboola 2021:4; Schmidtchen, 2025).

This new development of more dynamic management leadership theories included transactional and transformational theories (Bass 1990), together with lean strategy (Collis 1990) and agile methodology (Codrington-Lacerte 2020), dealing with the faster pace and increasing complexity of change processes. Transactional theories relate to mature organisations with clearly defined structures and goals with reward for effort, and the perceptions of fairness and equity of the motivational exchange to meet goals. The increasingly universal transformational leadership is about revitalising organizations requiring new direction (in the past this might have proved necessary once in a lifetime – today the need for transformational change often appears almost continuous). Innovation in digital technologies is frequently the driver of this apparently constant pressure for change, though of course this pressure for continuous *creative destruction* is bound up very much with the constant need for increased revenues of the big tech companies (Clarke 2019).

As Benmira and Agboola (2021:5) sagely conclude “In today’s complex, dynamic and globalised world, organisations are consistently dealing with change and uncertainty and no one theory has been able to address all the concerns regarding leadership. Many consider the traditional hierarchical views of leadership as less and less relevant given the complexity of our modern world. This led to a shift in focus from the characteristics and behaviours of leaders to a more systemic perspective, focusing on leadership as a collective social process resulting from the interactions of multiple factors. New leadership theories were consequently formulated in an attempt to deal with the new reality of organisations and business, resulting in newer and more relevant definitions of leader, follower and situation.”

Conclusions

Amid the Trump induced chaos of world diplomacy there must be some signs of hope. As the American sociologist Alvin Gouldner once insisted “if oligarchical waves repeatedly wash away the bridges of democracy, this eternal recurrence can happen only because men doggedly re-build them after each inundation.” If there is an *iron law of oligarchy*, there must be also an *iron law of democracy* (Gouldner 1955). The insistent forces undermining democratic bodies and poisoning the well-springs of truth and integrity eventually are always eventually countered by the forces for active democracy and decency. Vibrant and visionary leadership in the public sector can provide a bulwark against the international drift toward authoritarianism and reinvigorate the practices of participatory democracy and engaged citizenship upon which a dynamic public sector rests.

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