

## **Reshaping (local) public management in turbulent times: conceptualizing domains and providing recommendations for public managers**

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this article is to offer a critical analysis and a conceptual synthesis of the nature of local public management in contemporary times and to stimulate conversations and debates around the role of modern public managers. In doing so, following the approach used by other scholars (e.g. Nalbandian, O'Neill Jr. & Wilkes, 2013), we focus on the main current challenges of local public management and on the relative domains where these challenges are happening with the aim of formulating some recommendations to public managers.

We can depict at least three main challenges in the ongoing context of local public management: achieving higher efficiency and productivity in the operations; building and managing public networks for improving the efficiency and the effectiveness of policy making and service delivery; engaging citizens and stakeholders in order to co-build competitive and sustainable communities and to co-create public outcomes.

However, these kinds of challenges require public managers to manage in different domains: within the organization and its traditional institutional boundaries (the municipality), across the municipality in different kinds of networks and outside the municipality with other community actors.

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Accordingly, this article systematizes for each of the main domains [*organization* (municipality), *network(s)*, and the *community*] some critical areas where public managers are asked to make a difference, formulating a recommendation to public manager for each critical area.

In terms of research strategy and methods, we developed our arguments from a critical analysis of the literature and from systematizing the main findings of the extensive qualitative and quantitative research we have conducted on local public management in previous years. The paper is organized as follows: the second, third and fourth sections discuss some critical areas typical of, respectively, the

municipality domain, the network(s) and the community domain; the final section summarizes the main arguments.

## **2. MANAGING ACROSS UNCERTAIN BOUNDARIES IN THE MUNICIPALITY: CRITICAL AREAS**

The first critical area to be considered by public managers when they are operating within the municipality is the politics/management zone (e.g. Nalbandian, 2006; Overeem, 2005; Peters, 1987; Svara, 1998, 1999a, 1999b). This area refers to the grey and trading zone between the role of the management and that of politics which is constantly being negotiated (Baddeley & Martin, 2008, p. 18). This is a dynamic zone, and its boundaries are constantly re-framed according to contingencies, characters, contexts and episodes (Nalbandian, 2006; Svara, 2001, 2006, 2008).

Baddeley (2008) has extensively investigated the nature of the politics/management interactions, describing them as a hybrid zone where values created in political space encounter the legal, technical and financial parameters of government, and where professional values encounter the rationing of management working to an agenda forged in negotiation between politicians and managers. Manzie and Hartley (2013) used the metaphor of dancing on ice in order to evoke the delicate, symbiotic and precarious process of working together among politicians and public managers. However, politics and management in current times are increasingly situated in complex settings characterized by both vertical and horizontal multi-level arrangements and by various relationships with different stakeholders. For example, Sørensen (2006) has emphasized the polycentric and interactive nature of governance in contemporary society.

Accordingly, from a public manager's perspective, in order to make synergies among each actor in a way that the combination of politics and management can be greater than the sum of the parts (Solace, 2005), it is necessary both to negotiate more carefully the relationships with politicians and to recognize the new complementarity existing among politics, management and stakeholdership. In practical terms, it requires public managers to employ a more complex and systemic view of politicians, managers and other stakeholders.

The second critical area is represented by the intra-organizational space that exists across functions and services. Indeed, an increasing number of issues cannot be dealt with in a single department;

rather, they require inter-departmental teams (Nalbandian & Nalbandian, 2003, p. 86). However, public managers have traditionally acted in functional systems guided by hierarchy and silo structures. Thus, to manage across functions and services requires understanding that the current challenges can probably be better accomplished by moving from organizational structures designed around traditional corporate functions towards softer, flatter organizational structures designed around policies and public outcomes.

The third area concerns managing across disciplines (e.g. administrative law, public management, political science, sociology etc.) and paradigms. As a matter of fact, local public management in current times is the result of the historical layering of three different main paradigms (e.g. Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000; Hartley, 2005; Osborne, 2006): bureaucracy, new public management and (new) (public) governance. Hartley (2005, p. 29) wrote that they coexist as layered realities for politicians and managers, with particular circumstances or contexts calling forth behaviours and decisions related to one or the other conception of policy making and service delivery. Accordingly, in this specific area, the management challenge lies in the ability of public managers to use bureaucracy principles, tools and processes for accomplishing some issues, but also to use at the same time management and governance principles, tools and processes for others.

The fourth area can be synthesized as “managing across the public value chain”. The concept of public value (Moore, 1995) highlights the importance of focusing on outcomes, not just on inputs and outputs or on input/output ratios and productivity. This area can be pictured in terms of an open system in which inputs are converted, through activities and processes, into outputs and outcomes; accordingly, managing across the public value chain means that the search for higher efficiency in the operations needs to be pursued by redesigning processes across the value chain, in order to understand what has been the value added along the public value chain, by whom and how (Benington & Moore, 2011). The fifth area concerns the task of “managing across the political cycle”. This task should be dealt with according to the local environment and local circumstances and requires public managers to recognize the implications of different political times on the operations of local government. More specifically, in the current context of local public management, this requires public managers to give rapid responses due to the context of fast politics characterized by 24 hour news cycle and ever present

social media (Hartley, Alford, Hughes & Yates 2014, p. 3) and to help politicians to increase the awareness of the potential double effect of public announcements due to the increasing expectations of citizens towards public organizations. The double effect of public announcements refer to one positive effect, because public announcements can create trust and expectations of change and improvements, and one negative, because if the announcements are not respected owing to the different constraints or factors out of the control of the municipality, they can further undermine the trust of citizens in public organizations.

### **3. MANAGING POLYCENTRISM IN (PUBLIC) NETWORKS: CRITICAL AREAS**

The context of local public management is no longer represented only by the institutional, organizational and jurisdictional boundaries of the municipality; indeed, public managers are increasingly asked to manage in different networks comprising other organizations (e.g. Agranoff & McGuire, 2003). Thus, managerial functions – such as planning, organizing, command, coordination and control described, for example, by Fayol (1949) – are nowadays exercised in polycentric and multi-organizational network arrangements. Networks are considered by social sciences to be mechanisms more suitable than a single organization for dealing with the so-called “wicked problems” in order to manage the high interdependence of the current society (e.g. Agranoff, 2007; Kickert et al., 1997; O’Toole, 1997). Mathur & Skelcher (2007, p. 235) argued how network governance is reshaping the role of public managers, positioning them as responsively competent players in a polycentric system of governance rather than neutrally competent servants of a political executive; accordingly, they claim – together with other scholars, for example Edelenbos (2005) – the need for studying the role of public managers in the design and management of both hard and soft structures of network management processes and practices. Anyway, there are different kinds of networks where public managers are operating: as a consequence, in this article, five different critical areas are identified.

The first critical area is represented by horizontal public networks. Horizontal public networks are networks composed only by different public organizations operating at the same level. They can be used, for example, as a form of collaboration that aims to enhance the functional consolidation of

public services within and across jurisdictions. For example, the creation of joint institutional bodies and/or voluntary alliances among municipalities for shared service provision can be considered forms of horizontal public networks; they are usually referred to as a solution able to achieve operational costs and transaction costs reduction, economies of scale and scope, better service delivery etc. This is still much more relevant in countries where there is a high level of fragmentation among local governments, like for example France, Germany, Italy, Turkey and the US (see Lago Peñas & Martínez Vázquez, 2013). Public managers in horizontal public networks are asked to ease tensions among organizational nodes, to promote win-win games in order to overcome political resistance and to create the conditions for achieving economies of scale and scope.

However, public managers are involved not only in horizontal networks of public organizations, but also in vertical and multi-level networks among them. We define these kinds of networks as inter-governmental networks (e.g. Agranoff & McGuire, 1998; McGuire, 2006) and we refer here at them as the second critical area in the network domain. Public managers in inter-governmental networks liaise and negotiate critical issues for their municipalities with other managers of regions, central governments, agencies and other public bodies etc. Actually, in the interdependent institutional environment that we have, it happens that many times the final public outcomes can be reached only after several (positive) negotiations with different levels of government. Accordingly, public managers in inter-governmental networks are asked to engage in inter-jurisdictional politics, technical and operational collaborative knowledge development, and overseeing relatively complex operations that demand interoperability (Agranoff, 2013, p. 6).

A third critical area for public managers is related to community networks (Mandell, 1999). They can be defined as networks that link public, private and non-profit organizations. This kind of network needs to be distinguished from the previous ones for at least three reasons: first, the underlying philosophies of public, private and non-profit organizations stem from different causes (for example, respectively, producing public value, profits or social value); second, managerial principles, processes and styles in these kinds of organizations are different. For example, some bureaucratic procedures are typical only of public organizations, just as some managerial processes are typical only of the private or non-profit spheres (think about the peculiarities of managing volunteers in non-profit

organizations); third, each type of organization (public, private and non-profit) may have its own sub-objectives to be pursued, even if the main mission of the community network should be shared among the participant organizations. Accordingly, public managers need to design the networks and to manage the processes inside them by playing different network management strategies (e.g. Agranoff and McGuire, 2001; Koppenjan & Klijn, 2004; Klijn, 2005) and by overseeing sub-network behaviors in order to avoid the capture of public interest.

Network of professionals is the fourth critical area we are going to discuss. Indeed, every public manager should carefully consider the networks of professional relationships that he/she has and what the professional bodies or associations are that he/she is part of. To this end, several studies have highlighted how professionals' networks are a formidable source for spreading collaborative innovation, collaborative problem solving and social learning processes (Binz-Scharf et al., 2012).

The fifth critical area is represented by policy networks (e.g. Rhodes, 1997). Actually, policy networks are fragmented, informal and unstable webs with different numbers of participants operating in a given policy area, such as for example safety or community development. Here, public managers have the responsibility to activate and to organize these networks in order to address the relevant policy issues. In this regard, policy networks might be one critical area for realizing what Feldman & Khademian (2007) describe as the combination of local and contextual thematic knowledge with the technical expertise of public managers in order to find effective solutions to local problems.

#### **4. MANAGING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND PROMOTING COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP: CRITICAL AREAS**

Public managers are not only involved in reforming the municipality and in managing different types of public networks, but, as Nalbandian (1999) wrote, they have new roles in facilitating community and enabling democracy. As a matter of fact, today as never before, local governments should be oriented towards a sustainable strategy for their territories and communities. In other words, local governments are asked to exercise a community leadership. Even if community leadership can have different interpretations (Sullivan, 2007), here we consider community leadership as a process for transforming input, resources, social capital and the assets owned by community actors in a way that

they can contribute to the creation of public outcomes. Accordingly, the challenge of community leadership entails a new meta-governance role (Sørensen, 2006) for local government and it is linked to the ability of public managers to effectively engaging, creating synergies, orchestrating and empowering citizens and stakeholders (Nalbandian et al., 2013) in order to channel human and territorial energy and capital towards social innovation and towards the co-creation of public outcomes. Engaging stakeholders and citizens is a complex activity that requires mapping stakeholders, designing effective soft and hard structures as venues of the engagement and managing interactions with them. Alford (2013) has identified four different functions for engaging citizens and stakeholders: co-consultation; co-deliberation; co-design; co-production. Svava & Denhardt (2010) have proposed a different taxonomy based on a specific version for local governance of the public involvement spectrum made up by five phases: inform; consult; include/incorporate; collaborate; empower.

Here, we used the taxonomy developed by Alford (2013) to which we added a fifth dimension that is co-evaluation. Thus, we refer in this paragraph to five critical areas where public managers are asked to engage stakeholders and citizens for fostering community leadership. More specifically, we refer to co-consultation and co-deliberation as critical areas related to policy making, co-design and co-delivery as critical areas related to service delivery and co-evaluation as related to the auditing function.

The area of co-consultation refers to situations where the engagement of stakeholders and citizens is aimed at gathering ideas, information and contributions, although the final decision remains in the traditional circuit of representative democracy. In co-consultation experiences, public managers are asked to activate, mobilize and stimulate citizens and stakeholders to exercise their voice options in order to get their knowledge and expectations, while at the same time promoting trust and social learning processes among them.

The area of co-deliberation is characterized by the joint process of politicians and managers making policy decisions together with citizens and stakeholders. On this point, Nabatchi (2010, 2012) and Feldman & Khademian (2007: 319) highlighted the key informational role of public managers in infusing government decision making with reasoned discussions and the collective judgment of

citizens. Some examples of these experiences are represented by deliberative arenas, like those developed in participatory budgeting experiences.

The area of co-design lies in the service delivery area. Here, public managers engage stakeholders and citizens for co-designing the quantity, quality and priorities of the public services to be provided. In this area the dialogue with stakeholders might be more specialized, so public managers need to utilize citizens' and stakeholders' skills to provide more targeted public services; this dialogue is coherent with a service-dominant approach to public services management (Osborne, Radnor, & Nasi, 2013). Examples of practices that fit into this area are, for example, focus groups for co-designing social services that are developed with all the actors of the community active in some welfare-related services.

The area of co-delivery can be defined as the "mix of activities that both public service agents and citizens contribute to the provision of public services" (Verschuere, Brandsen, & Pestoff, 2012, p. 1085). In the co-delivery area, citizens and stakeholders are involved in the concrete delivery of public services or in the process of co-creation of outcomes of public interest. Again, it is important to distinguish this critical area from the previous one because it requires specific skills for public managers in nurturing and maintaining the relationships with stakeholders, as well as in enabling "a process of social construction in which actors in self-organizing systems negotiate rules, norms, and institutional frameworks rather than taking the rules of the game as given" (Bovaird, 2007, p. 857).

Finally, the last area is represented by the engagement of stakeholders and citizens for pursuing co-evaluation of public services and public policies. Some examples can be found in the popular juries and citizens' evaluation panels of public services. Like the other areas, it has peculiar rituals and features: for example, if we think about the politicians' sensitivity to exposing some data at citizens' judgments, we can easily understand how in this domain one of the main tasks for public managers resides in ensuring the accountability of these processes and in managing citizens' expectations in a way that they can increase their level of trust in local government; this latter aspect reminds us of the importance itself of co-evaluation activities for reducing the democratic deficits and empowering active and more aware citizenship.

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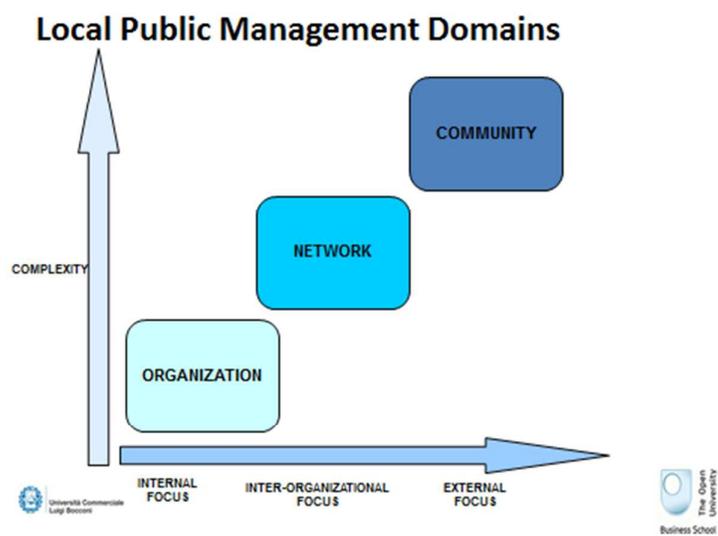
## 5. RESHAPING (LOCAL) PUBLIC MANAGEMENT IN TURBULENT TIMES

Local governments in contemporary times are coping with a new complexity of social systems (Klijn, 2008) and are continuously co-evolving with the contexts where they are engaged, while at the same time constantly interrogating and reframing their identities (Aagaard, 2012). Turbulent changing contexts, new complexity of the social systems, and shifting identities of local government are three fundamental elements that are producing new meanings and behaviours in the nature of local public management. Summing up, the nature of (local) public management is nowadays an open issue and it is constantly (co-)evolving with the (new) demands coming from a complex society.

The article has made three arguments at three different levels. First, at a broader level, it identified three main challenges for local public management in the current context: achieving higher efficiency and productivity within the municipality, managing public networks across the municipality and managing community engagement and promoting community leadership outside the traditional institutional boundaries of the municipality. Second, at a meso-level, it explained how these three challenges happen in three different domains: within the organization, across the organization in several public networks, and within the community. Third, at a micro level, it highlighted some critical areas for each domain and outlined some specific recommendations targeted at each critical area. The article proposed three focal points for starting to reshape the nature of local public management in the current era: managing across uncertain boundaries in the municipality, managing polycentrism in (public) networks and managing community engagement and promoting community leadership. The value of this organizing perspective is that it reveals the existence of multiple domains in the work of public managers, each one with peculiar critical areas that require specific behaviors, whereas the core message is that in the current context characterized by paradigmatic changes we need to reshape the nature of local public management.

Future research should continue to investigate and to conceptualize the nature of (local) public management in contemporary times in order to help public managers to better cope with the new challenges coming from the revolutionary times we are living in.

Figure 1: “Main domains in local public management”



Source: own elaboration.

**Table 1: The multi-dimensional contemporary context of local public management**

CHALLENGES	DOMAINS	CRITICAL AREAS	RECOMMENDATIONS	SYNTHESIS
Achieve higher efficiency and productivity in the operations by rethinking municipality's role and processes	Municipality	Politics/Management zone	Negotiate the relationships with politicians and recognize the new complementarity of public administration	<b>Managing across uncertain boundaries in the municipality</b>
		Functions and services – beyond silos	(Re)Design functions, structures and services in an outcome-centred way	
		Paradigms and disciplines	Integrate bureaucracy, management and governance principles and processes according to the issue	
		The public value chain	Understand how added value is generated across the public value chain	
		The political cycle	Recognize the implications of different times in the political cycle, give rapid answers and advise politicians on the use of public announcements	
Increase effectiveness in public policy and service delivery by building and managing networks	Networks	Horizontal public networks	Promote economies of scale and scope, win-win games and easing of political tensions	<b>Managing polycentrism in (public) networks</b>
		Inter-governmental networks	Manage the trade-off between centralization and decentralization and between autonomy and interdependence	
		Community networks	Play different network management strategies (McGuire, 2002) and oversee sub-network behaviours	
		Networks of professionals	Engage in communities of practice in order to spark collaborative innovation and collective (social) learning processes	
		Policy networks	Integrate the technical and contextual knowledge in order to frame and to achieve policies' objectives	
Co-create outcomes of public interest by engaging citizens and stakeholders	Community	Co-consultation	Collect ideas from citizens and activate social learning processes	<b>Managing community engagement and promoting community leadership</b>
		Co-deliberation	Synthesize the fragmentation of the different interests and manage the trade-off between efficiency and effectiveness	
		Co-design of public services	Use citizens' and stakeholders' skills for co-designing core and peripheral elements of the services	
		Co-delivery of public services	Empower citizens and stakeholders and nurture the relationships with them	
		Co-evaluation of public policies and public services	Ensure accountability, manage the expectations of citizens and stakeholders and build trust	

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13. Public Sector Management and Not-for-Profit

Interactive Session

**Publication of the Full Paper**

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### 13. Public Sector Management and Not-for-Profit

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#### **Reshaping (local) public management in turbulent times: conceptualizing domains and providing recommendations for public managers**

##### **Abstract**

*Local public management is undergoing a period of great complexity in current turbulent times. We identify three main challenges in the existing situation: achieving higher efficiency in the operations; building and managing public networks for improving the effectiveness of policy making and service delivery; engaging citizens and stakeholders in order to co-create public outcomes. These challenges happen in different domains: within the municipality, across the municipality and within the community. This paper systematizes for each domain some critical areas and provides specific recommendations for (local) public managers targeted at each critical area. Managing across uncertain boundaries within the municipality, managing polycentrism in (public) networks and managing community engagement have been presented as the key focal points for reshaping local public management in contemporary times.*

##### **Key words**

Local government; community leadership; public networks; public managers; public management.

