Understanding Administrative Leadership: Progressing towards a contemporary definition and framework

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ABSTRACT: Administrative leadership is more specific than mainstream leadership yet more expansive than political leadership, and as such warrants a specific focus. Despite this, the discipline argues that the literature remains neglected, which is partly due to the absence of a clear definition of administrative leadership (Van Wart, 2003) and an appropriate framework by which to evaluate it (Trottier et al., 2008). This article reviews the mainstream and administrative leadership literature, and presents an integrated definition of administrative leadership in the context of describing and understanding a public sector organisation’s leadership capability. Using the senior executive group as the unit of analysis, the proposed definition is expressed by way of a framework, which is used to evaluate the effectiveness of organisational leadership capability.

Key words: strategy, human resources, culture

Effective leadership in organisations enables higher-quality and more efficient goods and services; it provides a sense of cohesiveness, personal development, and higher levels of satisfaction among those conducting the work, as well as an overarching sense of direction and vision, an alignment with the environment, a healthy mechanism for innovation and creativity, and a resource for invigorating the organisational culture (Van Wart, 2003). Subsequently, public sector organisations are making substantial investments in leadership development (Fernandez et al., 2010).

However, scholars have argued that the administrative leadership research, being leadership in public sector organisations, is neglected (Pearce & Conger, 2003; Rost, 1990; Terry 1993). Van Wart (2003) posits that this is due to the existing literature being unfocussed, which is a result of not having a consistent and coherent definition of, and accompanying framework for, administrative leadership.
Whilst he presents a series of definitions for administrative leadership, they are at the individual level, which is not aligned with the manner in which public service organisations define and develop leadership capability (APSC, 2015; NSWPSC, 2015).

In order to achieve said definition, one must first explore the changing role and expectations of administrative leaders. As such, this article reviews the administrative leadership literature, including the contemporary practitioner perspective of ‘collective leadership’. This is then synthesised to produce a definition of, and framework for, organisational administrative leadership, which is developed inductively from the leadership, management and public administration literatures. The article concludes with suggestions for how the framework opens up new research directions in the field.

EVOLUTION OF ADMINISTRATIVE LEADERSHIP

Whilst the mainstream leadership literature has grown exponentially over the last century, the administrative leadership research has experienced neither the volume nor integration (Van Wart, 2003). Nonetheless, the administrative leadership literature has seen a gradual progression of thinking over time from statist and bureaucratic traditions to embryonic and pluralist traditions. This shift can be categorised by three paradigms; Public Administration (PA), New Public Management (NPM), and New Public Governance (NPG).

PA was dominated by the ‘rule of law’, with a focus on the administration of rules and guidelines, the policy implementation cycle, and the role of the bureaucracy in policy making and implementation (Osborne, 2006). Administrative leadership, as it pertained to the PA hegemony, was based on the doctrine of the separation of powers and concerned with the unitary state, where policy making and implementation was vertically integrated within government and reliant on hierarchy and vertical line management to ensure accountability (Day and Klein, 1987; Simey, 1988). A central principle of PA was the idea of employees being independent from the political process.

However, towards the end of the twentieth century, academics begun to argue that PA was too simplistic in its approach without adequate consideration of the different influences upon public policy
implementation and the complexities of public management at large (Osborne, 2006). At the same
time, heightening public accountability characterised by continual reform resulted in a drive for a
more efficient public sector (Dimock, 1986; Stone, 1981). This re-ignited the debate about
administrative discretion in regards to stewardship and management orientation versus an
entrepreneurial change orientation, redirecting the role of government towards NPM; a term that
broadly denotes the government policies since the 1980's that support the market oriented management
of the public sector as a means for government's achieving greater cost-efficiencies (Hood, 1991).
Grounded in neo-classical economics and rational choice theory (Becker, 1976), NPM asserts the
superiority of private-sector managerial techniques over those of PA based on the assumption that
doing so would improve the efficiency and effectiveness of public sector service delivery (Osborne,
2006).

The nature and success of NPM, however, has been heavily contested within academia (for example,
Farnham and Horton, 2006; Ferlie et al., 1996; McLaughlin et al., 2002). The criticisms of both
aforementioned paradigms saw a fundamental shift in the principles of public sector management and
the emergence of an alternative discourse, which led to NPG; arguably a more holistic, comprehensive
and integrated approach to public management. NPG is aligned to network and sociological theories
(Ouchi, 1971; Powell, 1990; Tsai, 2000), with a neo-corporatist value base. It is predicated upon the
existence of both a plural state, where multiple inter-dependant actors contribute to the delivery of
public services and a pluralist state and where multiple processes inform the policy making system
(Kickert, 1993; Rhodes, 1997).

Contemporary administrative leadership has thus developed into a paradox whereby the emphasis has
shifted away from mere technical proficiency to greater attention to competence, managing budgets,
and operational fitness (‘T Hart & Uhr, 2008). Similarly, administrative leaders are encouraged to
display initiative and innovation to achieve exemplary social outcomes (Shergold, 2007; Kane, 2007),
whilst at the same time being responsive to community demands with strict accountability regimes
demanding almost excessive process requirements (Shergold, 2004).
Collective Leadership

The aforementioned challenges facing contemporary administrative leaders, which became more pronounced in the 1990’s, coincided with the emergence of ‘collective leadership’ (Denis et al., 2012; Fernandez, 2010). This body of organisational research examines leadership not as a property of individuals and behaviours, but as a collective phenomenon that is distributed amongst different people, potentially fluid, and constructed through interactions (Denis et al., 2012). In their review of the literature, Denis et al. (2012) identify four streams of scholarship on collective leadership, each adopting different epistemological and methodological assumptions. The four streams are: sharing leadership for team effectiveness; spreading leadership within and across levels over time; producing leadership through interaction; and pooling leadership at the top to direct others.

The application of collective leadership to the public sector is supported by Collier and Esteban (2000), who adopt the view of public service organisations as complex adaptive systems (Collier & Esteban, 2000), emphasising the need for quality, flexibility, adaptability, speed and experimentation (Graetz, 2000). They argue that

“leadership in these organisations is the systemic capability, diffused throughout the organisation and nurtured by the members, of finding organisational direction, of generating and maintaining continual renewal by encouraging, harnessing and directing creative and innovative capabilities, while simultaneously holding in tension the processes of responsiveness to the environment on the one hand, and the maintenance of internal integrity of purpose on the other” (Collier and Esteban, 2000, p. 211).

The shift in the unit of analysis from the individual to the group level is evident by the way in which public sectors define and subsequently develop leadership capability (APSC, 2015; NSWPSC, 2015). As such, the notion of collective leadership is applied to this study.
Defining Administrative Leadership

Adopting the notion of collective leadership, it is argued that administrative leadership is a collaborative process whereby the senior executives combine their respective competencies to progress teams towards a desired goal (’T Hart & Uhr, 2008). To this end, administrative leadership is a composite of providing technical performance, internal motivation to followers, and external organisational direction, all of which is undertaken with a service delivery focus to enable effective government stewardship (Van Wart, 2003). Therefore, leadership is not a separate attribute (of ‘leading’), but intertwined with the managerial aspects of their jobs and continually reconfigured because of the political context in which they work (’T Hart & Uhr, 2008).

AN ADMINISTRATIVE LEADERSHIP FRAMEWORK

Recent studies have pointed out several critical weaknesses when it comes to collective administrative leadership, including the need to better articulate leadership models in these settings through the integration of transactional and transformation elements (Fernandez et al., 2010; Trottier et al., 2008;Van Wart, 2003). Scholars have attempted to develop and test collective leadership models (Fernandez et al., 2010; Fernandez, 2005; Hunt, 1991; Van Wart, 2005; Yukl, 2002). However, these models focus on leadership skills, traits, and behaviours, thus maintaining the individual rather than the leadership group (or ‘organisation’) as the unit of analysis. As such, there remains the need for additional theoretical development of integrated models specific to the public sector.

To this end, this study proposes a framework that reflects the aforementioned organisational administrative leadership definition. It is a means for describing and understanding organisational leadership in a public sector environment. It can also be used as a high-level model for evaluating organisational administrative leadership quality and effectiveness, thus balancing a theoretical and applied orientation.

The framework is based on Bernard Bass’ full range leadership theory (1985), which expresses leadership as a product of transactional and transformational qualities, which are characterised by
different behaviours contingent on the situation. The application of the full range leadership theory to administrative leadership is supported by Trottier et al. (2008), who (whilst not developing a framework) tested and proved the appropriateness of the theory in the public sector environment. They found that the integration of transactional and transformational leadership, as expressed in the full range leadership theory (Bass, 1985), captures the unique role of leaders in the public sector. Given the premise of this article, the theory is elevated from an individual level to an organisational level. This perspective has a greater positive influence on team performance than traditional top-down leadership (Carson et al., 2007; Ensley et al., 2003; Pearce & Sims, 2002), as well as being an important antecedent of group cohesion and collective vision (Ensley et al., 2003).

The proposed administrative leadership framework consists of three variables, which have been identified based on an extensive review of the literature to reflect the key enablers to effective leadership, with a focus on industry application. These variables are strategy, climate, and capability. Strategy refers to the ability of the leadership group in being able to work collegiately towards the determination, and achievement, of ambitious organisational objectives. Climate refers to the contingent factors whereby leadership behaviours and functions are mobilised in order to respond to given organisational situations. And capability is the manner in which the leadership group fosters workforce capability and develops its people to enable the achievement of organisational goals.

Each of these inputs are explored through a series of factors, which are displayed in Table 1 (below). In addition, each input has mapped to the full range leadership theory’s expressed behaviours in order to demonstrate linkages between the theory and the framework. However, as per Trottier et al. (2008), laissez-faire leadership is excluded from the model as it is considered ‘non-leadership’ and thus unnecessary for this study.

| INSERT TABLE 1 HERE |
Strategy

Strategy, the first input, comprises of three factors: partnership and collegiality; organisational acumen; and vision and ambition. Internally (within the leadership group), the strategy input considers leaders working collegiately as a team, with an ability to work across internal boundaries and unite towards a common purpose. Doing so requires highly collaborative ways of working, where relationships between an agency’s leadership are characterised by mutual trust, confidence, and respecting diversity. Externally, it involves the leadership group providing a sense of direction by way of a clear, compelling and coherent vision, and building ownership and alignment amongst employees to get there. This includes the pursuit of ambitious outcomes and a commitment to continuous improvement, with an ability to identify and respond to the most promising strategic problems facing the organisation. Doing so mobilises employees to action, making organisations more adaptive and responsive to the external environment.

Climate

Climate, the second input, introduces contingency theory (Fiedler, 1964) by allowing for situational specificity. It is comprised of four factors: culture; motivation; values; and change management.

‘Climate’ considers the leadership group’s ability to ignite passion, pace and drive, and their ability to do so in response to environmental changes. It also looks at the organisation’s culture and the role that leaders play in creating and sustaining employee engagement and motivation. In addition, it addresses the role leaders’ play in being outward-looking role models who act with integrity and embody organisational values. Collectively, this seeks to build trust and loyalty in the leadership group from both staff and stakeholders, whilst demonstrating pride in the organisation and its vision. Doing so fosters a harmonious and emotionally supportive environment that contributes to higher levels of employee job satisfaction and motivation; two variables that have been linked to higher organisational performance (Fernandez et al., 2010).
Capability

Critics of Bass’ (1985) full range leadership theory suggest that there is a bias towards over-emphasising the importance of transformational leadership at the expense of adequately addressing transactional theory (Trottier et al., 2008). Whilst the framework’s first two inputs are primarily grounded in transformational theory, the third and final input, capability, is more so modelled on transactional leadership with an increased functional focus, thus having a distinct human resource management alignment. It is an important contributor to organisational performance and does so by way of leaders who set goals, allocate labour, and enforce sanctions. They initiate structure for their followers, define job roles, and determine ways to accomplish assignments (Bass, 1991).

The ‘capability’ input is comprised of four factors: performance management; workforce planning; talent management; and learning and development. It addresses learning and development to ensure that people have the right skills, as well as ensuring appropriate workforce planning so that said skills are in the right numbers, in the right place and at the right time (Cotton, 2007). These efforts are supported by talent management practices that nurture the talent of both teams and individuals, along with transparent and consistent performance management, in order to get the best out of everyone. Organisations who perform well in this regard can more readily plan for, and fill, key capability gaps in the workforce and in the service delivery system, as well as build a highly mobile and flexible workforce (Becker and Gerhart, 1996). This ultimately increases workforce productivity and effectiveness.

CONCLUSION

Whilst there is a significant amount of mainstream leadership research, the administrative leadership literature has experienced neither the depth nor focus. Scholars have argued that this is due to the absence of a clear and coherent administrative leadership definition, and associated framework, which is specific to the public sector environment. The existing, albeit limited, research individualises leadership, which is juxtaposed to the manner in which it is described and understood by public service organisations. As such, there is a need to define administrative leadership from an organisational perspective using the senior leadership group as the unit of analysis.
Administrative leadership was thus defined within this article as “the collaborative process whereby the senior executives combine their respective competencies to progress the organisation and it’s employees towards a desired goal, as required by authorised processes to which they are accountable for.” This definition demonstrates disparity between the vast amount of administrative leadership research, and it’s application in practice. Therefore, it is argued that the administrative leadership field needs to re-direct its focus to ensure the research has applied value.

This article then detailed a proposed framework for administrative leadership, based on Bass’ (1985) full range leadership theory, which reflects the organisational perspective. The framework is comprised of three variables, which represent key enablers for effective leadership capability; strategy, climate, and capability.

Naturally, there are inherent limitations in this study, which could be addressed in future research to enhance the applicability of the framework. Firstly, the follower aspects of leadership are not well articulated, which is primarily a result of basing it on the full range leadership theory as well as it being reflective of the hierarchical, bureaucratic public sector environment. Secondly, both the administrative organisational leadership definition and framework are limited to the most senior executives in public sector organisations, though it is well regarded that leadership can exist across all levels in an entity. Finally, there remains a need to empirically validate the proposed framework.

Nonetheless, both academics and practitioners are encouraged to use the organisational administrative leadership perspective presented in this article to frame future research, such as evaluating the effectiveness and quality or organisational administrative leadership. Doing so will add breadth to the literature whilst increasing the applied impact by ensuring that research outcomes are both practical and relevant.
REFERENCES


### TABLES

**Table 1: Administrative Leadership Framework**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Input</th>
<th>Full-Range Leadership Behaviours</th>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strategy</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Partnership and collegiality</td>
<td>The corporate culture whereby leaders work collaboratively as a team across boundaries, united by a common purpose.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Organisational acumen</td>
<td>The ability to make tough decisions, and identify and respond to the most significant strategic problems facing the organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Vision and ambition</td>
<td>The development and communication of a clear, compelling and aspirational vision, with an ability to take risks in the pursuit of continuous improvement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Climate</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>The set of shared assumptions that guide the appropriate behavioural interpretation and action in organisations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>A workforce that is committed to, and enthusiastic about, their work and in turn takes positive action to further the organisation’s interests.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Values</td>
<td>The shared set of beliefs that indicate the type of conduct and accepted behaviours within the organisation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Change management</td>
<td>An approach to transitioning individuals, teams, and organisations to a desired future state.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Capability</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Performance management</td>
<td>The activities that ensure an employee’s work goals, as required by their job role in alignment with strategic objectives and priorities, are consistently being met in an efficient and effective manner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Workforce planning</td>
<td>Aligning an organisation’s human capital with its business plan to achieve its mission, ensuring that the organisation has the right people with the right skills in the right job at the right time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Talent management</td>
<td>The practice of identifying, developing and retaining high performing employees to meet future human capital needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Learning and development</td>
<td>The organisational activity (or activities) aimed at bettering the performance of individuals and groups in organisational settings.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>