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Public Leadership Meta-skills

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Without Abstract

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Synonyms

[Forms of collaboration](#); [Joint sensemaking](#); [Leadership metacognition](#); [Shared leadership](#)

Definitions

As societal complexity deepens, public leadership meta-skills become ever more important. Leadership meta-skills refer to generic leadership competencies (and skills) which are by nature both individual and representative of the collective capital of those in public administration leadership positions. Meta-skills are the essence of developing today's public institution leaders since they constitute joint sensemaking, know-how, and competencies which cut across organizational boundaries within government, public institutions, and public organizations, ignoring the compartmentalized sectors and organizational silos within public administration.

Introduction

Public institutions and organizations make their contribution to society through the democratic process, based on political goal setting, with the help of stakeholders and cooperating partners (and service providers), delivered by the performance of public administration personnel – and, via the subject of this entry, through leadership practices.

The focus of this entry relates to leadership meta-skills which is a theoretical, conceptual, and empirical topic and a relative newcomer in public leadership studies. Despite the fact that the evolution of public sector leadership and management studies has been a lengthy one – both in terms of theory and practice – there is definitely a scarcity of research evidence about leadership meta-skills (on the genesis of public sector leadership; see e.g., Van Wart [2003](#), [2013](#), [2017](#)). This entry explores what leadership meta-skills in the domain of public governance, policy, and administration are, why they are important, and from where do they evolve, as well as the practical implications of this from the development of leadership meta-skills in the context of public government, policies, and administration.

The motivation behind this entry is to further scrutinize the recent literature on public leadership meta-skills including our own work, for example, Tammeaid et al. ([2021](#)) and Virtanen and Tammeaid ([2020](#)). Public leadership meta-skills, we have argued, refer to generic leadership competencies (and skills) which are in nature both individual and representative of the collective capital of public administration leaders constituting joint sensemaking, know-how, and competencies cutting across organizational boundaries within government, public institutions, and public organizations, ignoring the compartmentalized sectors and organizational silos within public administration. From this perspective, public leadership meta-skills are not government branch-specific but rather overall skill requirements for all leaders in public administration. Learning to learn, taking the learned into practice, and critical thinking are among those meta-skills that are discussed in Virtanen and Tammeaid (ibid.), for example.

It should be noted however that the question of meta-skilling and meta-skills has been discussed to some extent in the leadership literature. A relevant example being Holten et al. ([2015](#)) who presented a model for an effective leadership training program that ingrates elements related to human biology, holistic learning processes, and the ingredients of transformational leadership elements within the context of change management. For these scholars, the notion of meta-skills refers to a set of skills which managers “can use and adapt to the changing demands and conditions of modern work life.” Like Tammeaid et al. ([2021](#)) and Virtanen and Tammeaid ([2020](#)), Holten et al. ([2015](#)) underline the point that meta-skills are elementary in bringing the lessons learned from training back into practice into the “real life” of organizations and the enabling role these meta-skills bring about to the habitus of the public sector leader – that is, if public leaders do not possess this ability, the consequences can be seen in the performance, motivation, and enthusiasm of their organizations.

One key motivation for exploring public leadership meta-skills is the need to determine per se the new rationale for public leadership. This new rationale calls for more cooperation, bridge-building, and joint sensemaking across the bastions of government topped with the need to conceive resilience not only as a adaption mechanism to acute and severe societal crises (such as COVID-19, for instance) but also as a distinct and specific policy goal. When New Public Management (NPM) and New Public Governance (NPG) emerged as mainstream management paradigms in the 1990s, the global context for public institutions was radically different than it is now. Although it is perhaps somewhat controversial to say that the complexity of society has increased, today public institutions face complex societal problems (which are manifest on a global scale) and undergo more profound contesting from media, political actors, and populism than ever before. The operating environment

of public institutions and public leaders is thus pretty much different than it was only a couple of decades ago. Today, public policy planning based on reductionism, narrow definitions of societal problems, and dividing critical societal issues into “governable pieces” is not only flawed, but it makes no sense from a wider societal perspective. The solution to wicked societal problems cannot be solved in a single policy domain but in collaboration with input from multiple policy sectors. Complexities in society as well as the volatility of change and the ambiguous role of societal shocks require cross-sectoral thinking and action, something which cannot be split to separate pieces. As such, this development calls for an understanding of what public leadership meta-skills can provide – an understanding that the whole public administration from all levels of governance (transnational, national, regional, and local) forms a systemic network, where a readiness and capacity to interact with the society has to be developed as a whole not in parts.

Consequently, the aforementioned changes in the operating environment of public institutions have brought about new challenges for the delivery of public services. These are the art of developing and putting forward the diversity of co-creation mechanisms and models, introducing a new accountability logic addressing the role of service users as key players in judging the value and merit of public interventions, and building cooperation networks to maintain and innovate service-dominant logic practice throughout the structures of public administration. These drivers of change point to the necessity of thinking differently and thinking together at the upper levels of top civil service. What is needed is a new kind of cognitive diversity which results from cross-sectoral professional leadership training, multilevel dialogue, and cross-boundary collaboration between public institutions, business, and nongovernmental sector which pinpoint and underline the essence of leadership meta-skills as defined above.

Secondly this entry explores the theoretical and conceptual framework behind the leadership meta-skills distinctive to public institutions. Thirdly, the typology of leadership meta-skills is presented and discussed. These meta-skills constitute a comprehensive set of leadership skills that are interlinked and can be learned but only if there is the will to learn. Section “ [Practical Implications](#)” discusses the practical implications of learning, nurturing, and scaling meta-skills in public institutions. These meta-skills contribute to systemic change in government and public institutions taking us through the mechanisms of the human-centered approach to leadership and the understanding of society as a complex entity. The fifth and final section “ [Conclusions: Synthesis and Further Research Agenda](#)” sums up the findings of the entry and, in addition, sets out the research agenda necessary to learn more about public leadership meta-skills.

Theoretical and Conceptual Lenses to Leadership Meta-skills

This section explores the theoretical and conceptual roots of leadership meta-skills. The section is divided into four subsections, the first section “ [Distributed Leadership, Meta-Governance, Metacognition, and Sensemaking](#)” concerns the leadership phenomenon and organizational agency, the second section “ [Systems Thinking](#)” systems thinking as an approach to conceptualize societal change, the third section “ [Positive Psychology and the Role of Positive Emotions](#)” the role of positive psychology and positive emotions, and the fourth section “ [Solutions-Focused Philosophy and Building a Better Future](#)” the role of solutions-focused and future-oriented thinking as the fundament of organizational agency.

Distributed Leadership, Meta-governance, Metacognition, and Sensemaking

(a) *Distributed leadership* is about sharing leadership practice, tasks, and responsibilities. It is closely related to concepts such as “shared,” “collective,” “collaborative,” “emergent,” and “co-” and “democratic” leadership. According to Bolden ([2011](#)), the concept (and practice) of shared leadership proliferated rapidly among academic circles as well as professional practice (especially in the field of education) around 20 years ago. Common across all different variations of shared leadership practice is the idea that leadership is not the monopoly or responsibility of just one person or authority. Another common feature in the diversity of definitions of shared leadership is beginning from a collective and systemic framework in respect of organizations, thus conceiving leadership as a social process. An interesting question here is: how well distributed leadership as a practice fits with organizations undergoing change? According to Fitzgerald et al. ([2013](#)), for instance, good and solid pre-existing professional relationships underpin the capacity of distributed leadership to implement service improvements in service organizations implementing change. Conversely, poor professional relationships, insufficient team building, and conflicts erode the concerted capacity of distributed change leadership. This finding suggests that the whole organization has to be geared toward leadership distribution in order to succeed in implementing organizational changes in a proper and successful manner. From the perspective of leadership meta-skills, the distribution of leadership is a relevant approach since it captures the idea of leading together with cross-sectoral leadership competencies.

According to Gjaltema et al. ([2019](#)), (b) *meta-governance* did not attract considerable attention in the public management literature until the last few years. Originally, meta-governance appeared in public management studies during the 1990s as an “organizational” or “thematic” solution to governance failures enhancing the accountability, transparency, and trustworthiness of governing networks and the proper use of public funds and resources. Moreover, one established the use of the concept referred to in rather general terms such as the “governance of governance or the organisation of self-organisation.” Based on their recent systematic review and conceptual analysis on meta-governance practices, Gjaltema et al. ([2019](#)) conclude that meta-governance is “...a practice by (mainly) public authorities that entails the coordination of one or more governance modes by using different instruments, methods, and strategies to overcome governance failures.” The essence of this definition is the different mechanisms and practices meta-governance adopts in coordinating and maintaining publicly delivered and/or funded activities in society. This requires cross-governmental approaches to leadership which, in turn, establishes a new type of relationship through meta-governance dynamics between government, governance, and the leadership of public institutions (e.g., La Cour and Andersen [2016](#)).

To a certain extent, (c) *metacognition* is a conceptual parallel to distributed leadership. It conveys the idea of being conscious about what we think about how we and others think which is similar to the notion of distributed leadership (“being aware of what I think about leadership and what others think about that”). According to Metcalfe and Shimamura ([1994](#)), for instance, metacognition is “cognition about cognition” or “knowing about knowing” which comes from the root word meta in metacognition referring to as “go beyond.” Albeit metacognition refers to the overall consciousness of individual and collective thought (i.e., knowledge about cognition); it also has a more specific dimension that relates to learning and problem solving (i.e., regulation mechanisms that govern the

use of cognition). Both of these components of metacognition are relevant when problematizing the nature of leadership meta-skills. The practice of these regulation mechanisms has remained a consistently hot topic of academic debate over disagreements about the architecture of the mind, its epistemology, and the ethical aspects of reading one's mind (see also, Efklides and Misailidi [2010](#)).

In simplified terms, *(d) sensemaking* refers to participating collectively through a process in “which active agents construct sensible events and structure the unknown” with the aim of achieving collectively more than people would do by themselves (Weick [1995](#), pp. 4–5). So, sensemaking is about bringing collective meaning to events that take place in an organizational setting. Making sense of collective terms – and following Weick (*ibid.*) – is about creating one's identity, handling issues and events together and retrospectively in a social process in an ongoing manner. Thinking in terms of public leadership and leadership meta-skills in particular the ability to make sense of the operating environment is central to strategic sensitivity. From the perspective of strategic management, strategic sensitivity and strategic imagination more or less replace traditional strategy formulation and bring strategic thinking into play as the everyday organizational collaboration practice of public leadership (see also Peng [2018](#)).

Systems Thinking

The strength and value of leadership come alive in interaction – in interaction between human beings and collective institutions. The underpinning logic here relates to conceiving public institutions as forming a systemic network. Systems approaches have a long history in organizational and public policy studies: understood and conceived from the perspective of systems, organizations, and public policies have been conceptualized in their environments as “rational, natural and open systems” (e.g., Scott [1987](#); Maguire et al. [2006](#)). Over the decades, for instance, general systems theory (GST) has affected greatly these domains of scholarly work. Scott ([1987](#), pp. 85–86), for instance, has argued that this has been the case because a large and growing number of organizational scholars tended to look at GST as a source of learning in terms of designing organizations – e.g., their workflows, control systems, planning mechanisms, and efforts to improve organizational performance – and how best this could be set up in order to carry out their missions. Drawing heavily on GST, systems design gradually entered the field of public policy. According to Von Bertalanffy ([1968](#), p. 32), there are models, principles, and laws that apply to generalized systems or their subclasses, irrespective of their particular nature, the nature of their component elements, and the relations or forces between them. It is however important to note here that looking from an organizational perspective, there are a variety of ways to approach organizations as systems.

Reed ([2006](#), p. 26) argues that this conception of organizations as social systems entered the field of organization studies in the late 1940s and the early 1950s. This was followed by the evolution of GST, originally developed within the scholarly fields of biology and physics which, in turn, provided considerable conceptual inspiration for the subsequent development of what is now known as socio-technical systems theory and “soft system” methodology and which actually dominated the field of organizational studies until the late 1970s and the early 1980s. This development reflected a wider renaissance of utopian thinking which presumed that the functional analysis of organizations as social systems would pave the way for the new conceptual and theoretical foundations of a new science of society. Seeing organizations as systems can be categorized in multiple ways, but analytically these varieties fall into two main categories: closed and open systems. Closed and open systems share common features but differ from each other significantly. For instance, closed systems

are responsive only to changes initiated by their own elements, whereas open systems receive inputs from its external environment. Open systems interconnect with other systems, thus laying the foundation for complex systems that are hard to predict because they are often very difficult to understand (e.g., Bardach [2008](#), pp. 338–339, 353–353).

In summary then, a complex system is an emergent and open system, and a comprehensive entity comprised of a large number of parts dynamically interacting with each other in a nonlinear way, with each part behaving according to some rule or force that relates it interactively to the other parts. Public institutions and organizations – and the sectors of public policy – are closed systems when we focus on organizations from the inside. Furthermore, public organizations operate also as open systems since they are – in real life – interlinked with institutions and forces that take place outside of public administration and connected with other institutions and environmental complexities that surround them from the outside. It is noteworthy to remember then that the transformative approach to public sector change considers change in a similar manner to that of open systems as they are open and adaptive to environmental pressures, utilizing different adaptation mechanisms to cope with change (e.g., deterministic, optional/negotiable, isomorphic, or pragmatic adaptation depending on the strength and nature of environmental pressure (see, e.g., Christensen and Lægraid [2016](#)).

Positive Psychology and the Role of Positive Emotions

Since Peterson's and Seligman's seminal book ([2004](#)), positive psychology has provided a new conceptual frame for better understanding how human beings, organizations, and work change by looking at the role of positive emotions, individual strength-based competencies, and individual and collective resilience processes and models (mental adaptability) (Green et al. [2017](#)). Positive psychology has reversed the pathological approach to human well-being and capabilities to sustaining virtues, strengths, possibilities, and human growth. Positive organizational scholarship is still in its developmental phase, but interest in actions that lead to positive processes and outcomes in organizations is as important for public sector organizations as it is for any other sector. As such, the strength-based approach generates promising answers to the deadlocks encountered by traditional competence management and transformative ability approaches.

Organizations building on strengths are characterized by their approach to utilizing the resources and enthusiasm of every employee, digging up unused potential for the use of the organization, basing the advancement and the evolution of tasks more on what the employee would like and could do than what he/she has done thus far, investing in facilitating good teamwork, making use of the diversity of people instead of standardized job descriptions, encouraging creativity and innovation, seeing problems more through the lens of mismatch than the lack of gifts, and encouraging employees to live a life suitable to oneself (Linley et al. [2007](#)). All of these are also important features in orchestrating systems change in organizations and societies.

In her “broaden-and-build” theory, Fredrickson ([2013](#)) described what positive emotions mean to people's learning and the way they act. When overcome by negative emotions is like walking while wearing blinkers: observations and thinking are narrowed and the ability to learn from the situation is limited. On the other hand, feelings of positive curiosity accelerate the ability to learn and create new kinds of thinking and action even in challenging situations and with only fragmentary elements.

Broadening positive emotions and building on them is an important part in strengthening psychological, physical, and social resources and widening the flexibility of operations. The ability

to engage in critical thinking is important in analyzing information and making reasoned judgment, while positive emotions help in observing any matter from multiple perspectives, taking different types of knowledge and experience into account, identifying and testing different alternatives, and considering their pros and cons. So, critical thinking should not be conflated with criticism, ruling out uncustomary observations and viewpoints and deteriorating relationships.

From the perspective of public leadership then, it is crucial to understand the importance of the positive emotions behind human activity and in developing a genuine interest in people, their ways of thinking, and their different realities. Systems thinking and the transformative approach to public sector change as well as leadership in public organizations can gain a lot from positive psychology in releasing positive human potential in societies and in public sector organizations.

Solutions-Focused Philosophy and Building a Better Future

Solutions focus (or solution-focus) is a vivid global practice in all professions dealing with people, yet it is not often described from the point of view of theory building. The reasons for this lie in the people-centrism nature of the solutions-focused approach which takes people's experiences, worldviews, and values as the starting point for all interventions. Solutions focus highlights the priority of practice, since "practice is something no one can do away with. Humans can stop thinking and reflecting or even be fully unaware of their doings, but they cannot stop practice" (Theory of Solution-Focused Practice [2020](#)).

Solutions focus builds on ideas of cybernetics, complexity, communication, feedback, social constructivism, and language philosophy, namely, the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Originally it was developed by therapeutic practices of Milton H. Erickson and the theoretical development, clinical practice, and empirical research of Insoo Kim Berg and Steve de Shazer (Theory of Solution-Focused Practice [2020](#)). Over the last 30 years, it has been applied across many areas of society, like leadership, human resources, healthcare, school, work design, organizational development, training, and coaching.

As a social constructivist approach, solutions focus abandons the enlightenment-based assumption that there exists an unbiased mind and objective facts that are waiting to be discovered in human and social behavior (Barret [2015](#)). Instead, it reminds us that interactions and perceptions are context-bound and subject to individual reflections. No problems, issues, or successes arise in a vacuum; attention must always be paid to the context. And if we want to make a positive difference, to building a favorable context. What we perceive affects what we think and what we think is portrayed in how we act. Meaning is created through social interactions, and that goes also for words having no fixed sense. Language is always used in relation to different contexts and other persons, and knowledge is first and foremost an interactive social achievement, not a private accomplishment.

In addition to seeing people as "holistic systems in interaction with systems," solutions focus makes a fruitful basis for skills development, leadership, and systems change by seeing people as enactive, capable, and resourceful – especially when invited to interaction nourishing their best features and virtues. This is a remarkable paradigm shift to appreciating the knowledge, experience, and strengths in different people and basing further development on that instead of orientation toward filling people's supposed skills gaps.

Building on what is working in human existence and interaction, solutions focus puts into action the things that a latecomer, positive psychology, researches (Bannik and Jackson [2011](#)). The solutions-

focused approach stays away from offering explanations from power or expert positions and underlines the importance of creating and hosting an interactive space where the best human features are nourished. This is done by nurturing collaborative and dialogical relationships and practicing the so-called not-knowing position (Malinen [2004](#)) by withholding judgment in terms of drawing consequences and staying actively curious of the way in which another person perceives the world.

The solutions-focused approach is cognizant of the fact that all interaction involves several contexts (personal, social, legal, political, cultural), stretching the human ability to engage in de- and recomposing, while framing and reframing from multiple viewpoints is at the heart of learning and development. In problematic situations the solutions-focused approach offers a “context of solutions” through open- and future-oriented questioning. Solutions-focused questions address, indirectly, the context that has created the problematic situation and explore possibilities for new understandings and new kinds of action to emerge (BTA-Practice Definition Group [2020](#)). So, instead of imposing external views or learning on a person, the solutions focus aim is to widen the view of possibilities and rearrange the knowledge and learning residing in people and groups.

For deep learning and systems change, solutions focus practice offers conversational tools enabling people to become aware of their own possibilities, to strengthen people’s agency, and to enable meaningful change. Solutions-focused philosophy and future orientation create a basis for addressing difficult issues and processing conflicting views in a manner that stimulates renewal.

The Typology of Public Leadership Meta-skills

Selection of Leadership Meta-skills

In a world of intertwined issues and interconnected societal problems, an important emerging question is how to raise and renew public leadership capabilities in order to face the various trans-contextual societal challenges on the one hand and, on the other, lead the transformation toward the needs of a changing world. These challenges call for the turn from the traditional leader-centered approach of change and capability building to systems thinking, networked leadership, and a more relational approach. Developing as a leader is a personal lifelong process which deserves constant attention and reflection, but an important part of leadership is also to enable others – personnel, colleagues, and cooperation partners – to develop, and to learn so that organizational practices are transformed to generate better administration for citizens and clients.

In every role in the public sector, it is important to reach out to other contexts and strive to understand how things look from the perspective of others. For civil servants previously accustomed to taking care of their own plot inside the legislative frame, coming to the edge of their own competence can be distressing and often raises concerns over desirability and permission. It is an important mission for public sector leaders to clear space for transformation, variety, experimental tryouts, and new ways of working. Leaders’ actions have a profound impact on organizational cultures as well as the public sector’s ability to renew itself and achieve good results. Public sector leaders are in a position to redesign public administration structures and workflows in order to take advantage of, for example, more joint working platforms and cross-administrative approaches which respond better to the current needs of citizens and act as enabling catalysts in societal development.

Organizations learn through both individuals and collectives (Chiva and Habib [2015](#)), and they learn in a timely fashion only if enough learning loops are embedded in everyday processes of organizations and networks. For leadership, this means shifting the focus to developing meta-skills both as personal skills and organizational practices, i.e., capabilities that are overarching and transferable from one sphere to another. Meta-skills are important in building the readiness to tackle varying issues regardless of the public sector branch.

Sometimes meta-skills are approached by publishing listings of “working life” and “future skills” and renewing them regularly (e.g., World Economic Forum). However, vital meta-skills are always dependent on the contexts in which people operate. Therefore, it is not fruitful to spend too much time discussing which skills are included on such lists and which are left out. It is more important to understand the nature and importance of meta-skills and their role in generating renewal and good results. Meta-skills that seem to be particularly important for public sector leaders in a fluctuating and complex world are dialogical positioning and an enabling mindset, learning to learn and harnessing thinking skills, taking a systems approach, and putting things into practice. All of these facilitate good trans-contextual interaction and promote integrative change and renewal.

Learning to Learn

From a foresight and future perspective, there is one meta-skill that outranks all others: learning to learn (Virtanen and Tammeaid [2020](#); Senge and Sterman [1992](#)). Learning cannot be portrayed as something that happens mainly at school or university and only during the earlier years of life. Good leadership is a constant process of learning. Changing the world and its operating environment requires a change in the way of thinking and acting. Everyday challenges can be seen as learning challenges for individuals, teams, organizations, and networks. They require reflection and the building of renewing learning loops individually and jointly as well as positively curious minds and persistence in overcoming obstacles and failures in building new knowledge. Critical questions in all leadership tasks include: How do I learn myself? Do I take time for it? Broadly enough? And how do I help my organizations and networks to learn from different sources of knowledge (cumulating experience, client interface, data, scientific research, tacit knowledge, foresight, creative approaches). In the context of systems change, learning to learn is the ability to view one’s own activities as part of a larger context and finding new and constructive ways to be and act as part of the emerging entity. Organizations in transformation need third-loop learning (Romme and Witteloostuijn [1999](#)), which is not memorizing but creating.

Systemic Understanding

Acting intelligently in a complex world calls for understanding that no human community is a machine or other entity based on mechanistic cause-and-effect relationships. Instead, there are many parallel realities present all the time. Individuals and collectives have their own, multi-angled perspectives, and the whole is made up of individual and shared narratives (Cronen et al. [2009](#)). Achieving change is always a process and requires a new kind of joint sensemaking, interaction, and feedback loops. In the systems approach, the illusion of ability to control human systems and societies is replaced by understanding that every part of a systemic entity affects the whole as in a game of dominoes. Action as part of the system can be enabling or opportunity-reducing. Instead of

describing and mapping the properties of the system, it is more important to see each other as part of the system and ask what we want to create together as part of the system. The fastest way to bring about change is to set in motion many small parallel processes that lead in the same direction (Termeer and Dewulf [2018](#)).

Harnessing Thinking Skills

Narrow conceptions of knowledge and a desire to solve complex issues with one mechanical approach or power are still common features in public administration. Harnessing thinking skills helps to overcome these rigid mental models. At the core of this transformation is the meta-skills of questioning your own and common beliefs and established practices in a constructive way. Thinking skills refer to metacognition, i.e., the ability to understand how one thinks and how other people construct their thinking, including how motives, beliefs, and emotions guide thinking, how decisions and choices are made, how they could be made better, how to test the reliability of the data and different scenarios, how to practice creative and intuitive thinking, and how to reinforce mental resilience.

The solutions-focused practice of framing and reframing (Mattila [2001](#); Sparrer [2007](#)) is both a practical and deep-seated way to develop one's perceptual choices and mental flexibility. Framing chosen for dealing with different issues affects a great deal of possible viewpoints and outcomes. Testing with different framings can lead to useful reframing, accelerating change. When a solution is co-constructed in interaction with reflection and open questions, it has already cultivated the subcultural and habitual ground of behavioral change. It is also important to note that since language defines our thinking, the use of language is also an instrument of thinking skills (McKergow [2013](#)). Human beings and organizations make constant choices over how they describe issues, incidents, and significant others. Choosing excluding and negative definitions reduces opportunities for good interaction and favorable outcomes, while choosing collaborative language and definitions creates cooperation.

Dialogical Approach

To succeed in leading people and enabling them to realize their capabilities to their full potential presupposes abandoning hierarchical and autocratic relationships. People usually have different roles in organizations and networks, but any collective functions best when it is a place for human working with human, not positions or statuses colliding with each other. The dialogical approach itself does not strive to new actionable solutions but merely seeks to widened understanding of different experiences and contexts, building bridges between them. Isaacs ([1999](#), [2007](#)) defines dialogue as an art of thinking together and an actionable skill, which improves the conditions for any cooperation or change.

Joint sensemaking happens through dialogue, and therefore dialogue is both an approach or mindset and an everyday skill used to create a dialogical environment giving freedom of thinking and expression for everybody and consequently maintaining interaction on an equal basis. As an everyday skill, it contains reciprocity in terms of giving time and appreciation to relationships and interaction. Gergen et al. ([2007](#)) have, for instance, emphasized dialogue as having often unrealized levels of coordination and insight originating from relational responsibility, self-expression,

affirmation, coordination, reflexivity, and the co-creation of new realities that help people to function in systems in a way that is fruitful for themselves and others.

Enabling Mindset

An enabling mindset – rather than a problem and deficit focus – is the breeding ground for seeing and taking new opportunities, creating new ways of working and interaction, and, even more importantly, appreciating the natural transformative capacity human beings and communities have. Organizations should pay greater attention to *how* than *what*, when it comes to common procedures, and focus on cultivating the enabling mindset. Human beings and human collectives are complex by nature, and no living system can be completely controlled. This basic rule of thumb in relation to complex human systems is useful to bear in mind also in the daily life of organizations and leadership. Echoing Capra and Luisi ([2014](#)), living systems can, however, be disturbed, and therefore it is important to ensure that the disturbance practiced (e.g., by leadership) has a positive effect.

Change begins with the assumptions people bring with them. Paying attention to the strengths and capabilities of the components of a systemic whole increases the functionality and developmental capacity of the human system. On the other hand, paying attention to the shortcomings and deficiencies of the components of the system reduces the functionality and development opportunities of the system. No systemic whole is irreversible in terms of reducing it to its parts, and, as such, it is the interaction of the parts that makes it unique. The ways of working and interacting in organizations are man-made and constantly evolving. The quality of the interaction determines the functionality of an organization.

Starting from what already works and learning from that, expanding successes and building on resources produces very different change results from those attained by avoiding failure or diagnosing problems. Planning by backcasting from the preferred future brings remarkably different results compared to looking at the past or focusing on describing why a problem exists. Although organizations and other human communities are not machines, there is a historic ballast of organizational scholarship to treat them like they were. Investing time and effort in good interaction and common platform building, opening up new viewpoints and possibilities, and building in intrinsic motivation require an enabling mindset and seeing human diversity as an asset. It also brings a different view on competence development taking it from filling competence gaps based on external assessment to setting goals together and supporting growth. An enabling mindset pays conscious attention to positive deviations and builds on them.

Reaching Out to Praxis

Many people have good and even innovative ideas, but putting them into action is a meta-skill that deserves special attention and practice. The idea of separating, on the one hand, planning and implementation and on the other strategic and operational management does not work in a systemic and networked world. That is also the reason why most of these plans gather dust on shelves instead of changing much on the everyday level. The way decisions are made is of great importance. Likewise, the implementation process and the means chosen have a significant impact on success in

reaching strategic goals, as well as on people's experience and behavior. No one can completely control a living system, so the only thing that can be influenced is our own actions in the system.

Promoting systems change is an organic process starting from inviting people to take part in the change, allowing for individual ways to participate, cultivating a process feeding the change in practice, staying curious and open to learning opportunities that appear along the way, and learning from the process while running. From a system's point of view, leadership can best be described as utilizing one's opportunity to influence in a particular situation or from a particular role within the system.

In principle, leaders' opportunities to show an example and enable change are greater than others. Two important ways of putting things into action in the systemic world are purposefulness and experimentation. The first meaning, primarily, explores the desired future in order to see in which direction the system wants to move and building a way forward instead of continuing with analyzing cause-and-effect relationships. The latter – experimentation – means taking an experimental attitude to discovering possible futures by action learning and experimentation.

There is a long tail of enlightenment supposing that thinking and reflection – “strategic planning” in governance terms – come before action. Social constructionism and enactive cognition have reminded that the process can also work in reverse (e.g., Barret [2015](#); McKergow [2021](#)): knowledge and action are linked; cognition is embodied and includes also nonlinguistic meaning-making. Experiments and design thinking are therefore an important addition to public sector's ways of knowledge creation and sensemaking.

Practical Implications

Enabling Systems Change

Developing meta-skills increases public sector leaders' capabilities in leading their own organizations in a positive way and working as a trusted part of egalitarian cross-sectoral networks. As a whole, developing meta-skills increases the resilience of the public administration and its capacity to act as a catalyst for future societal change. Meta-skills carry within themselves the notion of not trying to make either structures better or develop the individuals but rather to affect the systemic whole via multiple interactional paths. Meta-skills bring in a remarkable amount of Aristotelian virtue *phronesis* to public sector organizations and their ways of functioning. According to Darnell et al. ([2019](#)), there are two particularly important functions that *phronesis* performs for its possessor: first the ability to examine the situation from multiple viewpoints and pursue ethical deliberation toward finding the best possible way forward and, second, especially in dilemmatic situations, prioritizing solutions that integrate different components of the good life.

Meta-skills also derive from pragmatic philosophy the notion of seeing imagination, communication, and context as essential parts of decision-making and of putting thought into practice (Ansell and Geyer [2017](#)). In these iterative processes, emotion is intertwined with cognition and forms an integral part of solution building and skills development (ibid. Ansell & Geyer). Perception, consciousness, and emotions are often forgotten, but are a strongly related part of organizational and

systemic learning (Bateson [2016](#); Chiva and Habib [2015](#); Roeser and Pesch [2016](#)). Developing meta-skills is also an ongoing and lifelong process running parallel with everyday life and work. Working in different organizations (i.e., top civil service rotation), spheres, and cultures nurtures the ability for meta-skills development by making tangible the systemic principle of the “fish being the last to notice the water.” Governments that actively promote work rotation are better off in terms of developing leadership and civil servant skills related to understanding and using trans-contextual knowledge.

A Shift Toward Human-Centered Leadership and Systems Views of Change

The human-centered governance paradigm is gaining in importance (UK Policy Lab [2018](#); Bason [2017](#)), and meta-skills enhance the qualities that are needed in dealing with multi-contextual intertwined issues and reduce the tendency toward legalistic reductionism and managerial tunnel vision. Meta-skills also unpack the assumptions that lie behind traditional thinking of how change happens. Very often leadership and administrative actions reveal a belief in a causal logic of change based on commanding, using power positions, ordering, warning, restricting, threatening, or advising from an expert position. All of these are however generally ineffective ways of affecting human thinking and behavior in a sustainable and transformative way. They generate little or no change and promote external learning, negative emotions, and a loss of trust. Accelerating systems change and human-centered leadership mean looking at change as learning and co-creation.

The human-centered approach also challenges the customary ways of measuring and evaluating change by developing it in a more mission-driven and systems-based direction (Lähteenmäki-Smith and Virtanen [2020](#)). Traditional research questions and approaches around result orientation and accountability echo dualistic thinking interested in whether a change has happened or not. This kind of examination, however, leaves out the characteristics and nature of societal and human change. It relies on a managerial change view, where the change can be predicted, planned, and verified. There are strong tendencies toward a top-down view, strong belief in mechanistic and hierarchal manageability, and repeatability in the organizational world, and these reductionistic tendencies seem to be strengthened in the spheres of measuring and evaluation although they fit poorly with today’s complex world (e.g., Lowe [2013](#)).

Systemic change involving multiple parties means different learning for all the different groups and individuals, since they participate in the transition out of different contexts, backgrounds, roles, and strengths. In social change there is no “push button” that would start the desired progress everywhere and in any circumstances. Meanings are always co-created, and accelerating systemic change means taking a living systems approach, cultivating the dialogical conditions and nonlinear thinking, working with many aspects and different stakeholders simultaneously, and being interested in transformative change and openness for adaptation. It follows that looking at the effectiveness and outcomes of a developmental change of a system should be driven by the same assumptions (Virtanen and Tammeaid [2020](#)). Using nonmeaningful measures in evaluation and performance assessment has also in itself had a discouraging effect on motivation and trust (Lowe and Wilson [2017](#)).

It is important to evaluate transitions or systems change as dynamic learning processes where evaluation is an ongoing activity, guiding and redirecting the emerging change along the way.

Enriching learning loops are a propellant of change and focusing on them enables transition. This is also an important step away from dualistic thinking and not taking into account that systemic interactions are reciprocal and nonlinear (Van Bavel et al. [2012](#)) and affect the whole system both directly and indirectly. Systems thinking and systems change are hard for positivistic scientific thinking to internalize because of its adherence to the potential to define, describe, and master human self-organizing capabilities rather than appreciating and nourishing the human capacity to ride complexity and perpetually transform the patterns of system in a dynamic way. Echoes of this can be seen, for example, in the systems theory discussions raised by Burisch and Wohlgemuth ([2016](#)) and Cilliers ([1998](#)).

The discourse around the innovation capacity of organization has raised a distinction between incremental and disruptive change highlighting the importance of the latter. In a complex and ambiguous world, it is important to bear in mind that transitions with profound effects have a cross-sectoral effect and that the role of foresight, future thinking, and agile action is vital. From the perspective of systems change and meta-skills, there is though no conflict between incremental and disruptive change measures. Organizations and networks usually benefit from both. Creating and sustaining regular learning loops focusing on small changes, everyday innovations in working methods and learning cross-sectorally may not always produce disruptive innovations, but they do create and maintain the mindset of exploration and experimentation in the organization. They also lead to concrete small-scale changes which buttress the dynamic capabilities of the organization and can be crucial in archiving good results (Vermeer and Wenting [2018](#); Termeer and Dewulf [2018](#)).

A further important addition in terms of positive psychology that the solutions-focused approach brings to accelerating systems change is its stress on positive deviations. Noticing strengths and positive development, modeling successes and expanding from them, and boosting positive feedback are all key competences for dynamic organizations and for successfully developing self-organizing human systems. Shifting the spotlight onto this positive core thus alters the prevailing view of change, and learning from being something hard, imposed, and external toward a natural way for a human being to be in the world and to be ready explores it. This is a difference that “makes a difference” in change making.

Reshaping Leadership Training for a Complex World

The scholarly discussion around the appropriate and necessary forms of leadership development in the public sector has in recent times focused on behaviorally distinguishing effective managers from ineffective managers and on establishing holistic competency models (e.g., Hamlin and Whitford [2020](#); Skorková [2016](#); Larat [2016](#)). It is well known that there are a number of policy issues that can no longer be addressed alone either by sector or nation-state, thus heightening the need for new kinds of dynamic and transformative capabilities able both to adapt and shape the environment (e.g., Kattel and Mazzucato [2018](#); Teece [2018](#); Bourgon [2017](#); Burischa and Wohlgemuth [2016](#); Meredith et al. [2016](#); Mau [2015](#)). These findings indicate that a combination of coaching, classroom training, feedback, and experimental learning seems to have the best impact on leader performance and organizational effectiveness (Seidle et al. [2016](#); Parry and Sinha [2007](#)). Human-centered skills like empathy, ethics, participation, and design approaches are highlighted from the point of view of leadership interaction inside organizations and in achieving societal results (i.e., Quirk [2018](#); Van der Wal [2017](#); Bason [2017](#)).

Delivering training that builds capabilities to enable action in a complex world calls for the giving up of the customary knowledge-gap approach from the trainer's side and looking past the notion of teaching as knowledge transfer from one person to another. Seeing training as co-construction between the participants shifts attention from teaching to learning and creates a positive learning spiral that has ripple effects, also on leadership culture in a broad sense and for interaction in real-life settings (Virtanen and Tammeaid [2020](#)). The development of meta-skills via training can best be described as emergent learning meaning personal and collective empowerment, leading to new insights and greater action competence (Freisleben [2020](#), also Darling et al. [2016](#)). Using innovative and mixed methods and supporting both individual and joint agency, competence, and resources help to overcome various meaningful challenges. It also means going over to learning design based on socially constructed mutual learning and building on peoples' experiences, ideas, intuition, and mutual sensemaking instead of relying on expert lectures to form the content. It is time to see that there is no science- or expertise-based solution to every problem and providing new knowledge by lecturing does not usually generate new kinds of actions.

Systems thinking has clearly been influenced by cognitive psychology which is portrayed as focusing on mental models needing change as a prerequisite for transformative change. That is one way to describe changes on the thinking and identity level. Enactivism and solutions-focused approaches remind us though that human learning and change are happening not only at the level of thinking but also at the experimental level (McKergow [2021](#)), something which delivers an important message in terms of learning, training, and teaching. Solutions-focused training design constantly seeks links between large-scale endeavors and everyday behavior. With this combination it is a way to operate on several learning layers simultaneously and initiate learning, reframing-focused thinking, and action. It strengthens individual and joint meta-skills by broadening horizons, fostering dialogue, and joint sensemaking as well as learning by doing and putting ideas into action in real settings. This kind of training makes use of the previous skills and capacities of the participants, enhancing both individual and joint goal setting and building enabling mindsets. It is only when different kinds of knowledge are combined with skills and experiences in a manner deviating from how it has been done before that new solutions arise.

Training, the bringing together of multi-contextual groups, functions as an incubator of rearranging learning, discovering unpredicted new possibilities, and adapting learning and its outcomes to the individual needs of the participants derived from their personal backgrounds, situations, and aspirations (Jacobs [2017](#)). A well-designed multi-contextual learning is not only about putting the cognitive pieces together but also about rearranging present and previous learning in such a way that it leads to new understandings and to new ways to be and act in the world.

An important part of learning is activities that take the learners to real service touch points: develop capabilities to develop competences to simply observe without an immediate need to categorize, judge, or decide anything; and gather multi-angled information to ponder and after that practice the new skills. Leadership training supporting the development of meta-skills is also designed as a process allowing time, space, and continuity for immersion, growth, and bewilderment which is also an important part of transformative learning. A well-designed learning process is far from linear and always an entity impossible to reduce to its individual parts either working or evaluated on their own. In a long learning process, a keynote or an intriguing viewpoint can look and feel very different when first heard and after some months of thinking and processing. Often, some at first glance irritating features prove to be the most valuable ones in creating new kinds of thinking and action. Typically, a human being within a transformative change process is not really capable of evaluating

their own learning in the middle of the process. When thinking expands to new levels however, the capability for assessment is increased (Virtanen and Tammeaid [2020](#)).

Conclusions: Synthesis and Further Research Agenda

The topic of this entry – public leadership meta-skills – is still a relative newcomer in both the academic and practice fields in respect of public leadership. Grounded in systems thinking and positive psychology, the solutions-focused approach, as well as distributed leadership theories, metacognition, meta-governance, and sensemaking, the meta-skills approach offers a fresh way to approach the ongoing challenges of public leadership.

Adopting a systems approach to change and the development of leadership meta-skills reduces the burden of leadership uniformity, i.e., finding one model, solution, or shared understanding of a situation. Instead, conceiving of society as a system introduces the need to agree on future goals in a way that different parts of the public policy system better relate to each other. Understanding complexities is a prerequisite for public leaders to work toward societal goals which make sense from their position and viewpoints. Instead of trying to funnel down a shared opinion or definition, the meta-skills approach underlines the variety of human perception and context and harnesses these layers of action to benefit a wider process of transition. Developing meta-skills contributes to the development of capabilities that can impact systems change by hosting, creating conditions, and interacting.

In order to increase the capacity of the decontextualized public administration to act in our complex world, three substantial shifts are required: from structure focus to human focus, from governance to collaboration (reaching out to new modes of meta-governance), and from knowledge transfer to co-creation. Developing meta-skills is a way for the public sector to learn new and fruitful ways to interact with the society and to transform its own ways of working. The problems and issues public leaders handle are often ambiguous, challenging, and evolving. This raises the questions of framing and interpretation which are decisive in addressing them. Moreover, from the point of view of nudging systemic and transformative change, meta-skills become central by enabling new ways of encountering, reframing, and understanding.

The emergence of meta-skills as academic and practical reasoning in the field of public leadership sets out a number of possibilities for future research. These for instance include a detailed empirical cultivation of the acquisition and deployment of meta-skills and coupling meta-skills as a mechanism for contributing, attaining, and achieving performance goals set for public organizations and institutions. Moreover, an interesting aspect that relates to leadership meta-skills development here concerns the supply and demand of meta-skilling – how these meta-skills development aspects are anchored in the curriculums of public leadership training and how public leaders feel about the demand to focus on them. In the long run, additional analysis will also be required in terms of identifying the structural and organizational ingredients that trigger the emergence of meta-skills deployment and, on the other, how government and administrative structures evolve in relation to the adoption and development of meta-skills as a key element in public policy and public administration leadership practice. Finally, further exploration of the specific meta-skills relevant in a variety of diverse organizational contexts merits thorough theoretical, conceptual, and empirical research.

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