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## Leadership meta-skills in public institutions

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**Title:** Leadership meta-skills in public institutions

**Year:** 2022

**Version:** Accepted manuscript

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**Please cite the original version:**

Tammeaid, M., Virtanen, P. & Meyer, J. (2022). Leadership meta-skills in public institutions. *SN Business & Economics* 2(7), 84.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s43546-022-00262-x>

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## Leadership meta-skills in public institutions

### Abstract

This paper maintains that public institutions' and public leaders' role is important in providing the conditions for reasonable living and guaranteeing accountable spending of public resources. The paper explores the idea of meta-skills as a new leadership concept. It focuses on meta-skills particularly from the perspective of meta-governance, distributive leadership, and metacognition. Meta-skill capacity involves the ability to use overarching skills to learn other skills and proactively engage others in skill development and new learning. Meta-skills of learning to learn, harnessing thinking skills, and putting lessons learned into practice are brought up as universal meta-skills important for all public sector leaders despite branch of government and at the same time largely neglected in research on public leadership. The paper reflects the learnings from an empirical case of a long leadership training program conducted in Finland and discusses enablers and hindrances to public sector leadership meta-skills development and concludes that the role of leadership training should be re-thought – in order to enable structural and mental boundary crossing which is an elemental part and ingredient of any successful and effective leadership development practice.

### Key words

Meta-skills, public institutions, leadership development, training, learning

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## Leadership meta-skills in public institutions

### 1. Introduction

According to Pollitt (2015: ix), the nature of leadership training of top civil servants, "...is closely linked to some of the most crucial questions in contemporary liberal democracy, and its implications go far beyond the technical". This paper maintains that public leadership and performance management development is an important theme in society and does not always attract the attention it deserves. A multitude of knowledge, skills, and abilities are clearly needed in leadership positions, but the same traits, skills, abilities, and overall competencies are not required uniformly. Even during the same career different competences are required in different postings. Also, as organisations, institutions, and governance networks evolve, new competencies are required, and old ones discarded. This approach entails that leadership is constant learning.

The overall leadership of public institutions consists of two groups, the political leadership and the civil service leadership. Currently, the political level leadership, in many countries, is moving towards a populist direction in order to maximize electoral success (e.g., Batory and Svensson 2019). An interesting question that emerges from this then is how this affects the leadership elements in the civil service and how civil service public leaders attempt to forge a level of cooperation with the political leaders while maintaining and developing the performance capability of public institutions in this febrile climate. Moreover, this already complex political situation is organisationally exacerbated by the increasingly wicked and intertwined nature of public policy issues which demands civil service leadership and institutional renewal through the replacement of the traditional bureaucratic mindset with something more appropriate to meeting the needs of the more open and human-centred society of the 2020s.

The New Public Management (NPM) emerged in the late 1980s as radical and innovative public management doctrine. It conquered the bastions of the Weberian task-oriented administrative world in public administrations at least in the majority of the forefront OECD-countries in which little emphasis had been placed on the effectiveness of public interventions which entailed the stigma of a bureaucratic mentality. NPM did not offer much to leadership skills or to solve the practical transformation challenges. Close to the turn of the Millennium, the New Public Governance (NPG) started parallelly and gradually to supplement the NPM with new understandings about governance issues and particularly power networks. Nevertheless, NPG did not however offer much in terms of the practical challenges public sector leaders face in their everyday work.

What about public leadership, then? It seems that scholarship about public sector leadership is plentiful, originating from all over the globe and from many different types of governments. Countries have different administrative histories, work within different political systems, have different administrative cultures – and most of them have invested heavily in top civil service leadership training (e.g., Van Wart et al., 2015; Gill, 2011). The rationale for this paper stems from the paucity of the available literature on leadership training and development, especially that which assesses and discusses the role of meta-skills in public leadership development. It seems that there is no correlation between what in this paper is identified as 'meta-skills' and the numerous studies about the development of public leadership. In the context of this paper then, the concept of leadership meta-skills stems from three theoretical roots – meta-governance, distributed leadership and metacognition – and involves the ability to use overarching skills to learn other skills and proactively engage others in skill development, and new learning (e.g., Senge and Sterman 1992; Lonka, 2018). Meta-skills constitute a holistic view of leadership competences and are characterised by the capacity to evaluate what and how one is doing, thinking and defining priorities, as well as building capacities for 'learning how to learn'. This paper proposes that the development of leadership meta-skills offers a solution against the woes of both populism and traditional sector-based public administration leadership (e.g., Sanders, 2019; Goethals, 2018; Steffensmeier and Chrislip, 2017; Lee et al., 2018).

Summarizing, this paper argues that the institutions of public administration provide the conditions for reasonable living and enable the wellbeing of citizens. It is predominantly the public leaders' role to guarantee the value for money and accountability of public resources spent. This article asks what are leadership meta-skills and why meta-skills are relevant in leadership practice, especially in public institutions? This paper also discusses what tools and practices enhance the development of these skills? The empirical case of the paper is based on a long-term leadership training programme implemented in Finland by the Finnish Innovation Fund Sitra, and in addition to that it utilises leadership training experiences from other countries, primarily Singapore, Canada, and the Netherlands (e.g., Virtanen and Tammeaid, 2020).

The rationale of this paper is that leadership meta-skills are both individual and collective in nature. It also assumes that meta-skills enable leadership capabilities to be developed and transferred from one administrative branch to another. This happens through building public leaders' personal readiness to tackle issues and societal phenomena that do not fit into existing public administration organisational structures. At the heart of learning from this perspective is the notion of deliberate exploration for new horizons and the usage of one's personal agency in creating a better leadership. This paper advocates both the upskilling and reinvention of leadership-focused individual and collective meta-skills and future public sector leadership which is increasingly dependent on how the mindset of public leadership evolves and develops. The concept of meta-skills highlights the skills side needed in putting into practise the ideas of service-dominant logic, the theory of agile public institutions and organisations as well as strength-based solutions-focused practice and positive psychology, all aiming at the better motivation of public sector employees and enhanced service delivery to service users.

This paper is organised into three main parts. First, the theoretical background around the concept of meta-skills is discussed including the nature of public leadership as a practice and meta-governance, distributed leadership, and metacognition. Secondly, this paper composes the structure of public leadership meta-skills reflecting the learnings from an empirical case, namely leadership training programme initiated and implemented by the Finnish Innovation Fund Sitra<sup>4</sup> for the Finnish government during the period 2016-2018. This paper postulates the composition of leadership meta-skills as a three-legged structure, consisting of elements for 'learning to learn', developing thinking skills, and bridging of theoretical and conceptual leadership training contents with what public sector leaders' do in their everyday leadership practice. The bridging part of learning crystallizes structural and mental boundary crossing which is an elemental part of any successful and effective leadership development. Thirdly, this paper connects the main principles of meta-skilling of leadership practice to the development of a learning-oriented culture in public organisations and draws together some conclusions and sets out a future research agenda around this subject.

## **2. Theoretical and empirical context**

### **2.1. Public leadership as a practice**

It is reasonable to ask – as Ansell et al. (2017) had done – how do governments in general tackle enduring ambiguity and uncertainty in their systems and environments? If we accept the notion that the pace of change is quickening and the idea that the public sector plays a key role in the wellbeing of society, then a genuinely relevant question emerges; what is public leadership as a practice and how does it contribute to these ends?

Public leadership takes place in public institutions. Public institution is an equivocal concept. It covers democratic institutions (e.g. the parliament and the judiciary) public authorities and organisations (the police, government agencies, civil service), economic institutions (e.g., national banks), and transnational organisations and donors (e.g. the World Bank and the IMF). Overall, public institutions build upon the practices of democracy, transparency, ethical codes, the rule of law, and the effectiveness of public organisations (e.g., Boin & Christensen, 2008; Goodin, 1996.)

It is easy to share the view of Vustari and Rubtcova (2019) who state that public servants are important actors in the system of public goods and service delivery and that top civil service leaders play a pivotal role in this process by means of enhancing change leadership, psychological empowerment, and organisational trust (Mangundjaya 2019; Zak 2017). According to Hartley (2018: 203), much of the literature on public leadership focuses on those who possess formal authority in government and public services, thus public leadership has often been assumed to be about public sector leadership or leadership with regard to public services. Public sector leaders can be defined — echoing Van Wart (2017: 3–4, 26) — in a rather simple way; they are organisational leaders “who have a primary or sole focus on employees” and as leaders who focus on the execution and implementation of public policy interventions at local, regional, national and supranational levels. In Van der Wal's (2017: 7–8) words, these leaders are top managers/executives, line managers, programme/project managers and staff managers.

This paper builds upon Hartley's (2018: 212-213) notions on public leadership as a complex, contested and physically grounded practice which is about mobilising a wide variety of people, publics, and divergent interests. The context for

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<sup>4</sup> Sitra - the Finnish Innovation Fund, is an independent public foundation which operates directly under the supervision of the Finnish Parliament. Sitra's Supervisory Board is appointed by the Finnish Parliament and its Board of Directors consists for example of three Secretaries of State.

public leadership is fast-changing and complex and in order to understand it, sensitive antennae are needed to interpret the broader context for and among others. This is the point of departure for sensemaking in public leadership practice – and in particular that kind of sensemaking which takes place through collective cross-sectoral and future oriented discussions among top civil servants. According to Weick’s seminal work, sensemaking literally refers to making sense collectively through a process in “which active agents construct sensible events and structure the unknown” (Weick, 1995, p. 4-5; see also Helms Mills et al., 2010). In this paper, in deploying the concept of sensemaking, Weick’s definition is useful in placing it in the practice of public leadership – and more specifically utilising it to contextualise a collective process among top civil servants in their attempt to frame and solve complex problems in a complex world.

The complex and systemic nature of society and public administration creates the need for systemic leadership development in public institutions (e.g., Van der Wal, 2017; Meredith et al., 2016; Greve, 2015; Virtanen and Stenvall, 2018). The systemic nature of leadership development can be approached from the perspective of dynamic learning mechanisms which derive their origins from the changing mode of the operating environment, from the leaders’ own experience and personalities, from a learning-by-doing approach to leadership development, and from the ways and habits how public leaders learn and unlearn. In practice, the dynamic aspect of leadership learning take place in everyday work and in the form of training, coaching, and related activities specifically focused on leadership development. Dynamic learning mechanisms are incorporated into and embedded in human interaction, communication, modes of learning, and cognitive capacity. From the perspective of public leadership meta-skills, dynamic learning mechanisms are essential.

Some examples of research on leadership meta-skills with regard to public administration and public services already exist. Holten et al. (2015), for instance, hold the view that leadership meta-skills require a holistic learning process which emphasises the transformational leadership elements of envisioning, translating, communicating, and sustaining credibility during change, whereas Billing (2003) and Intarakamhang and Kijthonthum (2019) have suggested that communication skills are among the most generic leadership skill that are important regardless of the leadership function. In the field of social entrepreneurship, Al Taji and Bengo (2019) have underlined the distinctive managerial challenges posed by hybrid organisations and explored the model suitable for strengthening the generic leadership skills in the leadership of social incubators, accelerators, and social ventures. Baker and O’Brien (2019) have written about affective abilities (and relate their reasoning in developing generic leadership skills) and clustered them in sections such as leadership on people, facilitation, interpersonal, intrapersonal, reflection, and judgement. Echoing Goddard (2011) and Goffee and Jones (2000), meta-skills can be described as abilities for asking powerful *what if*-questions. Overall, it seems that research literature concerning public leadership meta-skills remains underutilised and far from fertile.

## 2.2. Meta-governance, distributed leadership and metacognition

In the context of this paper, the concept of meta-skills is theoretically and conceptually anchored with the concepts of meta-governance (e.g., Gjaltema et al., 2019; Kooiman and Jentoft, 2009; Jessop, 2002; Roe, 2020; Klijn and Edelenbos, 2007; Dommet and Flinders, 2014; Sörensen and Torfing 2009), distributed leadership (e.g., Karriker et. al., 2017; Bolden, 2011; Gronn, 2000), and metacognition (e.g., Tarricone, 2011; Efklides and Misailidi, 2010; Proust, 2007; Prins et al., 2006). These theoretical roots are briefly discussed in as follows.

The theory of meta-governance – or governance of governance – focuses on how values, norms and principles underpin governance systems and governing approaches as well as on how to deliberatively guide governance process in networks (e.g., Gjaltema et al., 2019). However, the limits of meta-governance are evident when leadership skills and leadership development tools are considered as a mechanism to maintain and further develop the capabilities to act in the unpredictable and complex world. In this paper, the usefulness of the concept of meta-governance is in fact that it makes explicit the evolution of generic leadership skills (which is referred in this paper as meta-skills). This conclusion parallels with Jessop (2000), who has doubted whether governance can really provide a compelling theoretical entry-point for analysing contemporary social transformation, for coping with complexity, leading people, and to understand the value of public leadership meta-skills in leadership development.

The concept of meta-governance is thus insufficient to explain the role of generic leadership capabilities relevant in public organisations. Distributed leadership theory offers a promising point of entry to think about the motivation and logic behind the nurturing of the generic capabilities. Bolden (2011), for instance, in exploring the similarities and differences between distributed leadership theory and related concepts, such as ‘shared’, ‘collective’, ‘collaborative’, ‘emergent’, ‘co-’ and ‘democratic’ leadership, found that the usage of these concepts varies over time, between countries and between sectors but that they still have common elements. They aim at collective sensemaking and use of broader capability pool which is an important aspect in the reasoning in this paper. Bolden’s (ibid.) conclusion is that

there is much emphasis in distributed leadership on learning and on thinking abilities which makes distributive leadership interesting also from the point of developing leadership meta-skills. Distributed leadership theory is useful also for other reasons in the deployment of public leadership meta-skills as a concept: Gronn (2000), for instance, sees distributed leadership as a potential solution to the problem of approaching leadership as a device to approach public institutions role in systems design, changing role structures, and broader systems change.

Finally, metacognition theory is essential in thinking about leadership meta-skills. Metacognition is often defined as thinking about thinking and it is exemplified in all the activities through which one tries to predict and evaluate one's own mental dispositions, states and properties for their cognitive adequacy (Proust 2007). Prins et al. (2006) have argued that correlational patterns exist between intellectual ability, metacognitive skilfulness and the learning outcomes of both novice and advanced learners. Metacognitive skilfulness rather than intellectual ability appears essential for learning (and unlearning) when learners operate at the boundary of their knowledge sketching out for new competencies and solutions.

### 2.3 Empirical background

The empirical case in this paper is public sector leadership training organized by the Finnish Innovation Fund Sitra in Finland during 2016-2018 for the Government of Finland. All together 140 top executives from twelve ministries and six government agencies took part in long-term training program designed to address the present and future leadership challenges of the public administration. The trainings included contributions of various experts, a wide variety of collaborative working forms both during the training days and between them as well as interactive e-learning. We acted as organizers, facilitators of learning, co-trainers as well witnesses of all six learning journeys of cross-sectoral training groups during intensive 18 months' time. The structure and contents of the programs as well as feedback inquiry and dialogical evaluation model used is thoroughly described and analysed by Virtanen and Tammeaid (2020), but the key elements of these Sitra leadership trainings are summarized as follows.

First, the training made explicit the idea that learning to learn is a personal choice and focusing on meta-skills development is crucial from the perspective of ministerial organizations. If the aspects of learning and unlearning are overlooked, then leadership training most likely will fail to attain its goals. Mostovicz et al. (2009) have made a relevant point by arguing that leadership is a developmental process based on the type of choices a leader makes. In the Sitra leadership training case, top civil service leaders developed as leaders only if they made the deliberate choice to go forward with the idea of development. It is easy to agree with Mostovicz et al. (ibid.) when they argue that leaders need to recognise the choices they make and try to adjust them to fit with their own worldviews.

Secondly, the path to learn and make sense of meta-skills is dependant with the contents of leadership training. To be successful, the leadership training was based on collaboration and socio-constructivist view on learning. This approach entails the idea that participants set their own goals in addition to collective (group) objectives. This brings about new roles for public leaders in leadership training – they are not dealt with as passive lecture listeners, but active information creators, critical thinkers, and experimenters of building personally the contents of new knowledge relevant in leadership practice. Also making use of previous knowledge of all participants and merging the variety of knowledge, experiences, and viewpoints together in collaborative manner are key ingredients in putting leadership training structure and contents together. Learning is created together, and a positive emotional atmosphere is an important part of learning.

The Sitra leadership training approach made visible that the top executives in public administration are well acquainted with conceptual thinking and adroitly consume high-class presentations from world-class speakers. The training made explicit, however, that while top-class speakers were welcomed, these high-class speakers succeeded only if they provided their cases/main points as topics for joint discussion and the welcomed challenging views and experiences. Day (2000) makes an important point advocating the view that there is a strong connection between organisational life, the practice of leadership development, and its scientific foundation.

Third, collaboration and working together in mixed groups are apparently among the most productive ways to widen leadership training participants' mindsets and to introduce new horizons. In the Sitra training, the total group of 140 participants was divided into mixed groups of 23-25 participants from different ministries and agencies, which made possible to train all of them in relatively small groups and all within the fairly short timeframe of 18 months (2016-2018). State Secretaries, Director Generals and other top executives of different ministries and agencies evidently benefitted from having the majority of the members of the board of directors in training at the same time, but in different groups with influences from colleagues from other ministries and agencies. Using mixed groups was an idea

which was based on what McIntyre (2019: 85–88) labels as creating critical communities and providing the wisdom of crowds. The training confirmed the idea that it very good if the participant groups in leadership training are orchestrated as mixed groups (people coming from different administrative sectors) which enhanced the idea of interaction and collaboration at the end of the day.

Fourth, organisational scholarship based on positive psychology and building strengths-based organisations as well as the future-oriented solutions-focused (SF) approach on learning and talent building were essential overarching concepts for learning design, facilitation, and the composition of learning assignments and communications (Fredrickson, 2013; Virtanen and Tammeaid, 2020). They also provided promising answers to the organisational deadlock involved in focusing on traditional competence management and non-existent cross-sectoral co-operation. To put Sitra training experience into a more overall leadership training context, it can be argued following Seidle et al. (2016), who have recently underlined that a combination of coaching, classroom instruction, feedback, and experiential training has a significant impact on leader performance.

One outcome of this Sitra leadership learning process was the evolution of three key meta-skills (learning to learn, harnessing thinking skills, and reaching out praxis), which will be scrutinised in the following section.

### **3 Empirical reflections**

#### **3.1 Learning to learn**

In a complex world, the ability to learn conveys the idea that we can see new emerging situations as learning opportunities, to identify our own personal and professional strengths and to find effective personal and joint learning strategies. Learning to learn is crucial both in working with stakeholders and in ensuring the functionality of one's own organisation. It is also required in all the roles linked to forming public policy and putting it into practice as well as in those roles associated with monitoring administrative functions.

According to the experiences gained during the Sitra leadership training the difficulty in respect of 'ability to learn' relates to the personal histories of public sector leaders at the very top of the public administration. Most of the participants went to schools and universities when learning largely meant the passive absorption of expert knowledge. In the world of free-flowing information, complex issues seldom obey the limitations of the traditional academy of scholarly sciences or of administrative units. This leads to a situation in which the perception of learning and the ways of understanding multitude of knowledge creation must also be updated.

Also, public institutions and public leaders are often inadequately equipped for the 'learning-to-learn' mindset because the focus of the public sector has traditionally been more in preserving than renewing or keeping abreast of the times. It would, however, be very useful to shift the focus of top civil service competence development not only towards learning skills, but also towards capabilities which are transferable from one sphere to another and to build readiness to tackle varying emergent issues. The ability to transfer skills and capabilities from one context to another is a key element of successful leadership and even more importantly, the key element of creating new kind of perception, action, and relationships (see De Jong and Berg, 2012).

At the top civil service leader level, there are number of impediments to 'learning to learn'. These include the fear of making mistakes which is deeply rooted in the psyche of the top echelons of the civil service and can lead to hesitation to take any action instead of tackling a complex issue demanding cross-sectoral approach and new ways of working. It is understandable then that there is a demonstrable need to avoid errors and that it is perhaps most prevalent in those public sector organisations which are directly exposed to public criticism. The desire to avoid mistakes however has the potential to paralyse the organisation, making it overly cautious even where it is evident that change is required. Also, dealing with complex societal phenomena and building continually learning public organisations requires cross-sectoral cooperation, versatile thinking, broad participation, and the creation of new solutions which are not always self-evident, nor do they occur automatically. In order to work effectively in chancing world well-developed abilities are needed for working with transdisciplinary and value conflicts, integrating different types of knowledge, and getting involved in open-ended processes by broadening of the community of practice through social innovation and experimentation (e.g., Ansell and Geyer 2016).

#### **3.2 Harnessing thinking skills**

The need to sharpen thinking skills in order to produce new kinds of solutions to societal issues is a call to the whole of society, not only to the public sector leadership and leaders in public institutions. Identifying the nub of public sector leadership and addressing the issue of 'learning to think' may then sound rather whimsical in nature, an oxymoron even.

One of the primary issues that inhibit reassessment of the embedded administrative and functional paradigms are rigid mental models combined with a lack of habit to use tools to broaden mindsets and the lack of the tradition of questioning one's own and common beliefs. A narrow conception of knowledge and a desire to solve complex issues individually – part-optimising – prevents individuals from learning both individually and together. The everyday ability to learn and renew thinking is driven primarily from our capacity to challenge our own beliefs and established practices.

The ability to learn from what is by nature different is a central skill of human existence (e.g., Illeris, 2018). This creates new thinking, action and new solutions to challenges - both big and small. As a skill, however, it remains tantalisingly out of reach if we continue to cherish the ideal of simplicity and rationality in our own thinking and look for ready-made models in the way we build organisations and how they conduct their everyday activities. Rapid reactions, evaluating and black-and-white categorising are obstacles which hinder learning in our everyday lives.

Referring to Marques (2012) and Fredrickson (2013), there are two key elements that can remarkably improve the quality of thinking: critical thinking linked to longitudinal meaning of actions and positive curiosity. Both help the leaders – and anybody – to acquire a broader perspective and see more options than in sticking to conventional patterns. Fredrickson points out the value of positive emotions as catalyst for creating both nurturing collegial relationship and new solutions even out of challenging and even fragmented elements. Simultaneously, our psychological, physical, and social resources become stronger, and we become more flexible in our actions.

From the perspective of leadership and performance management, thinking skills bring about the ability to pose better questions and frame and reframe common tasks in a more useful way. It also highlights the longitudinal effectiveness of the public policies and basic purpose of the public institutions and creates a platform for future oriented creation of collaboration between public sector institutions. It is important to bear in mind that consciousness, perception, and emotions are also an important part of cognition and affect leadership and life of institutions and policy measures deeply (Chiva and Habib, 2015). Fostering creativity is an essential part of thinking skills, although in the context of the civil service it has already been a somewhat controversial issue for some time. Creativity in the sense of instilling new working practices is an essential skill for a responsive organisation living in compliance with time.

### 3.3 Reaching out praxis

According to Bourdieu (1990), public leaders are an elite cadre and leadership training is a spectacle of the social world of public administration. To see things (and the value of leadership training) objectively, 'outside of the box' to use that well-known business slogan, offers a mental passage to conceive of leadership development from a wider perspective. If top civil servants are representatives of the levels of social structure of public organisations, then the social world of public administration is approached through the performance of leadership training as a process, in which practice is the forum for the acting-out of roles, the deployment of leadership competencies and skills and the implementation of public leaders' development plans in real-life settings.

Practical logic helps to organise all thoughts, perceptions and actions by means of generative principles which are closely interrelated and interconnected and constitute a practically integrated whole. Among these generative 'ground-forming' principles are the mechanisms used to transfer learning experiences from leadership training to the everyday life of public institutions and organisations as well as the ability to entice organisational citizens – all agency groups striving towards the goals of public organisations – to be part of this implementation process.

Active, future-oriented and mission-driven leadership deeds are important in the context of public sector leadership because, in the everyday life of public organisations, legislative and procedural traditions combined with a Weberian and Tayloristic view of effectiveness lend support to a passive leadership attitude. The characteristics of futile leadership include framing issues too narrowly and part-optimisation based on the boundaries of one's own unit – a phenomenon which has reportedly been one of the key problems of performance measurement in public organisations (e.g., Bouckaert and Van Dooren, 2009; Virtanen and Vakkuri, 2015). Focusing mainly on constraints, holding back information, avoiding mistakes and settling for managerial façade legitimation on the tracking and showing results are also common features of a public leadership which is not fulfilling its real function. With actively enabling leadership the public sector could use its power to create new possibilities and fulfil its potential as a catalyst for societal and organisational development, characterised in such leadership deeds as using one's own potential to enable change.

The key skill of an active and catalytic leader is the ability to lead rich, dialogical, and forward taking discussions with large and small groups in a manner that people get heard and where joint thinking and action emerges. This applies both to every-day team meetings and citizen dialogues in the spirit of co-creation. The ability of different people to collaborate also largely defines the overall performance of the organisation while working practices develop and change



best through knowledge and thinking created in a collaborative manner. The skill to lead groups in a dialogical manner is usually something that must be trained and specifically learned by present-day leaders, since the tradition of talent and performance management is highly focused on leading individuals.

Taking into consideration all previously said it is an important task for public sector leadership trainings to meet these challenges of co-creation in every-day work of public sector institutions and support large-scale thinking and reframing of policy issues to meet the every-day behaviours of both leaders and public institutions (Virtanen and Tammeaid, 2020). In this regard, it is important how leadership decisions are made, the way the means of implementation are chosen, and possible futures experimented. The value of leadership training is fulfilled only if it brings about visible changes in public organisations and in the way they co-operate with other institutions and directly with citizens. To this end, leadership training should provide the means for public sector leaders to carry out practical ‘learning-by-doing’ grounded learning experiences – which can be embedded in various forms of learning activities and real-life experiments helping the participants to renew their role. In of the Sitra leadership training, all participants accomplished real-setting experiments including elements of rethinking the conventional way to understand the role and contents of policy instruments and engaging societal stakeholders through open dialogue in public policy processes.

#### **4. Discussion**

Broadening the horizon of public institutions and leadership out from a simple managerial law enforcement function into an active and future-oriented societal catalyst, requires an enabling attitude and mindset change in human resources management functions and leadership training. This focus shift does not happen by itself nor without investing in development of generic leadership skills, something we have termed meta-skills in the context of this paper.

Importance of possessing leadership meta-skills applies to public and private sector organisations, though there are certain fundamental differences to consider: although building ecosystems and shifting towards service dominant logic have become somewhat fashionable ideas, private companies in general compete with each other over market share, and in the race to produce innovative products and services. Public organisations form an entity taking care of their public duties in different sector areas and do not compete – or at least they should not do so. Instead, one of the key conclusions from the Sitra leadership training was that public leadership is predominantly about cooperation. Thus, seeing and training the public sector as whole and forming the training design from the point of view of the over-arching and longitudinal purpose of the public sector functions, and focusing on developing leadership meta-skills. It is not only fruitful but also a prerequisite for boundary-crossing cooperation and working together ‘over’ existing organisational hierarchies and administrative branches and siloes.

In addition, meta-skills development can appear as a gateway to overcome the increasingly complicated relationship between the political leadership and the civil service leadership. Both of the groups play an important part in development of public administration – therefore, achieving a mode of good dialogue between political and civil service leadership is not simple per se, but without meta-skills fostering broad view and dialogical mindset it easily stays unreachable.

#### **5. Conclusions**

Public sector leadership development and performance management models exist in a complex system consisting of various building blocks, such as government agendas, the governance model, organisational structures, and leadership traditions. The concept of meta-skills offers a new approach to appreciate the value of these traditional mechanisms and viewpoints connected to structures and dynamics about learning and unlearning. In this paper, public leadership meta-skills have been treated as a possibility to develop new public leadership concept. The potential of the concept of meta-skills is noteworthy on the basis of the Sitra leadership training programme (the reflected empirical base of this paper) and merits further empirical research.

Leadership meta-skills build upon meta-governance, distributed leadership, and metacognition two-dimensionally. Firstly, from the perspective of public sector institutions and public sector leaders, meta-skills is a way to develop public leadership as a unique and distinctive form of leadership which to some extent differs from leadership practices deployed in the other sectors. Moreover, from an individual perspective, leadership meta-skills are also important for leaders in both the private and non-governmental sectors. They build a platform for cognitive sensemaking, well-being, and the feeling of coherence of public leaders. Meta-skills enhance mutual learning and create trust and cooperation.

Secondly, meta-skills can be conceived as a form of leadership that can be developed through well designed and implemented training. That implies leadership training approach that it is not based on the traditions of knowledge

transfer. In order to enhance leadership meta-skills, leadership training should build on reciprocal learning, training which engages the attention, and learning motivation of the participants. The Sitra leadership training programme was successful because it was built on deep-rooted pillars of a social-constructivist approach to learning, solutions-focused facilitation and training design as well as practical implementation of the lessons learned. In the words of Termeer and Dewulf (2018), it met the criteria of activating thinking, learning, and experimentation with reframed or altered views, values, and inference.

From the perspective of traditional way of seeing public leadership, however a number of hindrances exist to meta-skills development. First, with regard to learning to learn, there is unawareness of the necessity to unlearn (among the participants at the beginning of the training), immanent fear of making mistakes (in fearing, for instance, career options and various benefits), and the lack of understanding of complex phenomena as the basis of public policy making in the context of societal complexity. Second, concerning harnessing thinking skills, the most obvious hindrance is the existence of rigid mental models preventing the renewal of thinking and action. Third, there is often the inability to construct practical applications and the enabling of approaches which would make a real-setting difference with regard to contents provided in traditional leadership training.

This paper sets out several possibilities in respect of future research in public leadership development. These include, first, the more detailed empirical scrutiny of the use of leadership meta-skills in public leadership practice, i.e., what public leaders actually do in their everyday practice when they deploy meta-skills. Also, looking at use and type of meta-skills at different levels of government administration and also municipal and regional parts of the public sector would make an interesting comparison. Secondly, interesting questions are how culturally specific these meta-skills are in different administrative traditions, and how do the actual challenges of different administrations affect meta-skills required. Third, the exploration of leadership training methods for leadership meta-skills is still far from fertile as a field of scholastic inquiry. Also, other learning methods above training should be considered in getting a full picture of possibilities for advancing leadership meta-skills development.

On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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