Teamwork in the 21st Century: Relevance and Challenges for Public Service Organizations

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Introduction

Public service organizations are progressing in becoming more knowledge-based and more technologically evolved. The changing dynamic has made an impact in the overall dynamic of employees and stakeholders in the public sector. The nature, understanding, and purpose of leadership in teams are becoming a pertinent topic that affects every individual in the public sector. The simplicity in the idea of public sector employees working in teams belies the reality that understanding the concepts and theories of leadership in teams entails exceptional intricacy and complexity. Many individuals in the public sector are consistently utilizing teamwork, but this ostensibly simple concept has many definitions about what team leadership entails and theories to explain how teams operate in different settings. The aim of this research is to provide a pragmatic assessment on the state of the field of teamwork and leadership research in public administration, while having a brief comparison of teamwork and leadership research in the fields of leadership and management.

Challenging and Changing Dynamic of Public Service Organizations

There has been a gradual increase of public service organizations utilizing teamwork among their employees in order to increase productivity and services. Even though a great number of public sector employees work in teams, there are still many questions regarding which variables lead to effective and successful teams. Despite the proliferation in the use of teams in the public sector, there is still a paucity of research being conducted on leadership in teams. Therefore, analyzing what has been done and what has not been done is pertinent.

Public service organizations have traditionally relied on a hierarchical style of leadership where there is one leader directing, delegating, and enforcing control over their employees (Bass, 1990; Halal, 1994; Wood & Fields, 2007). The public sector employees usually perform as they are

told and do not have any input in the daily operation and task of the organization. The hierarchical style of leadership runs counter to the environment in most public service organizations today.

Public service organizations must have the ability to adapt with the diverse and changing market environment in order to compete with private and non-profit organizations from around the world. The concept of distributing and sharing the leadership among all individuals in a team is more prominent today than just having one leader hoarding all of the power. This concept can be difficult to accept in public service organizations because it goes against the many norms of the traditional dynamic in the public sector. Nonetheless, public service organizations have started to deviate away from the rigid hierarchical style of leadership and now place a greater emphasis on sharing, collaborating and cooperating among the employees. The diversity in public sector employees and the multiple stakeholders that are served can be difficult to analyze for managers. Even though teamwork may not be ideal in every situation, public service organization leaders have the commonality in determining the feasibility of implementing the use of teamwork for their public service organization.

This topic is important to explore because most of the research on leadership in teams are currently found in other social science journals and may not directly translate over to the public sector (Stewart, 2010; Sundstrom et al., 2000). Each public service organizations confront different challenges and variables that may affect the productivity outcome. Research being conducted by other academic fields may only be applicable or accommodate the private or non-profit sectors rather than public service organizations because of the different criteria in the those sectors.

Distinctions Among the Different Sectors

Some researchers found that there are minimal differences between the public, private, and non-profit sectors (Allison, 2012; Euske, 2003), but other researchers determined that there

are significant differences between the three sectors. Bretschneider (1990) found that the three differences between the public, private, and non-profit sector are in personnel management, in the management of information systems, and the decision making process. There are several characteristics among the different sectors that distinguish one from the other. This research seeks to determine if the literature on teamwork in leadership in the fields of public administration, leadership, and management targeted the public, private, non-profit, or all of the sectors.

Methodological Approach

Several different approaches were used to locate articles for the inclusion in the content analysis. In the first step, the Social Science Citation Index was used to determine the top academic journals in the field of public administration. The articles that were examined were published from 1999 through 2012. The years 1999 through 2012 was used for the analysis because it provided a thorough understanding on the progress and the improvements that are needed for research on leadership in teams. In the second step, this research utilized an electronic computer-assisted search of various databases to locate relevant academic articles for the literature review. The computer-assisted search consisted of using the keywords "teamwork," "teamwork and leadership," and "leadership in teams." The electronic databases that were used for the keyword search were: ABI/INFORM, Academic Source Premiere, Business Source Premiere, and EBSCOhost. The third step was a manual review of the table of contents of each journal volume from 1999 through 2012.

Research Results

The search yielded 4 academic journals spanning 14 years with a total of eleven articles examining teamwork and leadership in public administration. The 3 other top public

administration journals did not contain any research in regards to teamwork and leadership. In comparison, when examining the top journals in the leadership and management fields from 1999 through 2012 there were more research on leadership in teams. The leadership field had 28 articles while the management field had a total of 41 articles (refer to Table 1).

Table 1. Number of Articles Located

	Number of Articles Located (1999-2012)	Percentage
Public Administration Journals	11	13.75%
Leadership Journal	28	35%
Management Journals	41	51.25%

The analysis found that between 1999 through 2012 twenty-five articles (31.25%) addressed teamwork and leadership for the public sector, thirty-six articles for the private sector (45%), one article for the non-profit sector (1.25%), and eighteen articles (22.5%) addressed all of the sectors (refer to Table 2). The results indicate a need for public administration researchers to conduct more research on leadership in teams for public service organizations.

Table 2. Target Group of Research

Target Group	Content Analysis: Articles Located (1999-2012)	Percentage
Public Sector	25	31.25%
Private Sector	36	45%
Non-profit Sector	1	1.25%
All Sectors	18	22.5%

Relevance of Research for Public Service Organizations

Leadership in teams is becoming relevant in the academic and practical aspect of public service organizations. Public service organizations are now attempting new work structures in an

effort to increase service, productivity, and efficiency. Although the traditional hierarchical style still exists today, public service organizations are now embracing collaboration, cooperation, empowerment, and motivation among their employees. The intent of this paper was to examine the state of leadership in teams literature in the field of public administration. The purpose was not to argue that teamwork is essential for effective organization, rather the objective was to provide a content analysis to emphasize a need for the field of public administration to conduct research more vigorously on teamwork. Multiple stakeholders in public service organizations depend on the ability of employees to work well in teams. While there has been significant progress on teamwork in public service organizations, there remains to be more research in understanding the effectiveness and teamwork and leadership (Carson, Tesluk, & Marrone, 2007; Morgeson, DeRue, & Karam, 2010). Public administration research must adapt with the changing reforms and different challenges facing public service organizations.

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