

# Good Leadership in the Public Sector?

Dominik Vogel examines the behavior of  
public administration leaders

*Ministries, district offices, and town halls – nowhere else would you less expect to find charismatic leaders who skillfully lead their employees, motivate them, encourage excellence and inspire identification with their employer. Instead, we expect regulation to dictate the work of everyone from the executive down to the clerk. But is this really true? Administrative scientist Dr. Dominik Vogel wanted to know more about it, so he started examining leadership behavior in public administration. The results surprised not only him.*

“It had always been assumed that leadership plays almost no role in the public sector, because things function quite differently there,” says Vogel, who wrote his doctoral thesis as a research assistant at the Chair of

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Public and Non-profit Management. “Hierarchical structures, numerous laws and regulations that determine workflows and tasks, tenured employment, various forms of participation, such as staff councils – these aspects promote conditions that facilitate the smooth running of processes and deemphasize the individual. This, of course, makes leadership more difficult.” These assumptions have not been scientifically proven. There was a lack of similar studies. “Until now, we have known next to nothing about these issues.”

Vogel wanted to change this. In his master’s thesis, he had researched public employees’ motivation, so looking at the “other side” – at leadership behavior – was not far-fetched. His “case history” also helped him identify institutions willing to participate in the investigation. This was no matter of course, Vogel explains. “Leadership is a sensitive issue, and many doors remain closed. People are generally interested in this topic but are also afraid of uncovering a potentially sobering reality.” Fortunately, the researcher was able to use existing contacts – and confidence. He also offered to provide his project

partners with the individual results of the study and to explore areas for improvement together with them. “A true win-win situation,” says Vogel. Two federal state authorities and a district authority ultimately agreed to take part in the project.

But how do you actually “measure” leadership behavior? “In general, by using questionnaires,” the scientist explains. Although observational studies can offer much data, they are difficult to analyze. The same is true for experimental investigations using roleplay. Field studies that could evaluate measures to improve leadership are possible as well. “In essence, it is about identifying the means and behavior that executives can use to successfully motivate their employees to achieve a common goal – the organization’s goal.” This is done mainly by interviewing leaders and subordinates. A total of 64 executives at the street-level and 464 of their subordinates completed the questionnaires. The survey was conducted anonymously to comply with strict data protection requirements, but also to prevent possible fear – of bosses getting bad “marks” and of employees facing retaliation for publicly criticizing their superiors. Vogel also worked with a code system to match the statements and combine their evaluation.

## THE PROJECT

### Leadership in the Public Sector: An empirical analysis of antecedents of leadership behavior

Participants: Dr. Dominik Vogel

Duration: 2011–2015

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📄 <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn/resolver.pl?urn:nbn:de:kobv:517-opus4-89214>.







#### THE RESEARCHER

**Dr. Dominik Vogel** studied public policy and management at the University of Konstanz, the University of Potsdam and the Universiteit Twente (NL). Since March 2011, he has been a research assistant at the Chair for Public and Non-profit Management of the University of Potsdam. Since August 2016, Vogel is a Assistant Professor of Business Administration, especially Public Management at the University of Hamburg.

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The investigation's methodological starting point was leadership behavior in private companies, which has long been the focus of research. "I was inspired by a concept called 'taxonomy of effective leadership behavior', long since established in the private sector," he explains. It divides leadership behavior into four categories: task-orientation, relations-orientation, change-orientation, and external-orientation. Task-orientation describes how leaders facilitate performance and control the work process. The second category comprises the relationship of leaders to employees: Do bosses give feedback to their

employees on their work? Do they feel responsible for their employees? Do they provide for their development? The third category determines how leaders initiate or moderate changes in workflows transformation, for example as part of digitalization or as a result of new statutory or internal administrative requirements. External-orientation, in turn, describes the leaders' ability and willingness to think beyond their own organizational unit and to consider, for example, the network of the whole institution and even beyond it. Are bosses only interested in their own department, or do they keep an eye on the bigger picture? How do they externally represent their team? Considering the specific features of public administration, Vogel developed two additional categories for his investigations: ethical- and expert-orientation. The first focuses on how leaders are committed to and ensure compliance with ethical standards. Given their normative social role, this category is particularly important for public administration, says the researcher. The second, specially designed category is geared toward examining the dual role that executives in the public service often have to adopt: On the one hand, they are entrusted with executive functions; on the other, they are experts in the field for which they are responsible. As a result, they are not only the boss of their employees but also guide them professionally – in a dual function, one that is predominantly rejected in the private sector.

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*Leadership is a management issue, even in public institutions and administrations.*

*With good leadership, all of the gears in a team fit together better.*



Vogel also investigated which factors influence the behavior of leaders in administration. What effect do, for example, personal characteristics of bosses have – age, gender, etc. – and how does their motivation to lead, i.e. their interest in it, affect how they lead their subordinates? How do expectations of others affect managers' leadership behavior, both by the employees and the higher management levels? Can leadership behavior be improved, for example through the use of management tools?

The aim of his project was neither to evaluate the leadership qualities of individuals nor of "public authorities", emphasizes Vogel. "I deliberately excluded any assessment of what is good and what is bad. The point was to get an overview of the dimensions that were or were not particularly pronounced in administrative leadership behavior."

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How are public administrations actually led? "That depends on whether you ask the managers or the employees," Vogel says with a grin. There is a wide gap between self-perception and the perception of others. "This difference is surprisingly large, 7-25%, larger than in the private sector, where it is normally only 3-5%. "The most significant discrepancy in self-perception and that of others became evident in the category of relations-orientation, i.e. the relationship between boss and employees. It does not mean that the employees accuse their superiors of inactivity or even gave them poor marks in this field. It is, nevertheless, a signal. The employees' assessment was basically average in all categories. "According to the employees, the intensity of leadership behavior is medium, with almost no differences between the individual areas," says Vogel. "It was lower only in change-orientation."

The managers, in turn, stated that they mainly focus their attention on the above-mentioned relations- and ethics-orientation. They also confirmed a below-average interest in change-orientation. "One could say that ad-

ministrations have difficulty with change," the scientist says. "One could also say that such aspects are considered as being mainly a task of upper management." Rather disappointing though were the influencing factors. The assumption that leadership might be intensified by strategic management tools could not be confirmed. It did become clear, however, that managers who use modern management tools such as quality management or management by objectives also demonstrate more intensive leadership behavior. Personal characteristics – except for motivation to lead – played almost no detectable role. After all, executives pay more attention to their leadership role if they are expected to do so– and also, for example, if it was communicated when they were hired.

He was positively surprised by the results, Vogel emphasizes. "I honestly expected worse – the institutions as well, by the way," he says, laughing. The results he introduced to the executive management boards of the three institutions were met with great interest. Vogel is, however, not very optimistic that they will be taken as an opportunity to devote more attention to leadership behavior in public administration, although he would like to see a practical application of his research.

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"I think public management research should be application-oriented. Of course, we do not say, 'You do it all wrong, and we know it better', but the findings could be used to improve processes. Feedback instruments about leadership, for example, could be used to close the gap between self-perception and the perception of others."

For him as a researcher, the study – his dissertation project – is only the beginning. "I realized that such a broad approach to describing leadership behavior is the best way to cover everyday work and processes in public administration, and we are just beginning to explore this field."

The results can be transferred to universities to a limited extent, Vogel says. "There are parallels in the administrative areas, but institutes and chairs are structured differently and act more autonomously." That does not mean it would not be worth also taking a look at leadership in academic structures at universities. "Leadership is an issue for professors, for example when supervising young researchers. And we could certainly assist them in this field."

MATTHIAS ZIMMERMANN