

Leadership in public management: Some theoretical and methodological considerations

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LIDERAZGO EN EL SECTOR PÚBLICO: ALGUNAS CUESTIONES TEÓRICAS Y METODOLÓGICAS

RESUMEN: Basándose en la literatura existente y en los debates más relevantes que se están produciendo –tanto en el ámbito académico como en el de los gestores–, sobre liderazgo en el ámbito público, el artículo propone un modelo analítico innovador para estudiar este crucial tema. Para desarrollar el análisis se comienza con una propuesta de diferenciación entre la gestión pública y la privada, de naturaleza incremental, y centrada en las especificidades que se derivan de los objetivos de uno y otro sector. Tras ello, se desarrolla un modelo comprensivo que tiene como finalidad identificar las variables situacionales propias de dicho sector, considerando tanto el factor potestas como el de auctoritas propios de la teoría política clásica. En concreto, la hipótesis que se pretende demostrar es que el contexto demanda diferentes modelos de liderazgo que consideran el nivel de responsabilidad de los gestores y el nivel de institucionalización y poder de la organización donde los gestores desarrollan su trabajo.

PALABRAS CLAVE: gestión pública, liderazgo, teoría administrativa, metodología administrativa.

LEADERSHIP DANS LE SECTEUR PUBLIC : QUELQUES QUESTIONS THÉORIQUES ET MÉTHODOLOGIQUES

RÉSUMÉ: Sur base de publications existantes et des débats importants qui ont lieu – autant dans le secteur académique que dans le secteur de gestion –, à propos du leadership dans le secteur public, l'article propose un modèle analytique innovateur pour étudier ce thème important. Le développement de l'analyse commence par une proposition de différenciation entre la gestion publique et la gestion privée, intensifiée et centrée sur les spécificités qui dérivent des objectifs de chaque secteur. Un modèle compréhensif est ensuite développé afin d'identifier les variables situationnelles propres au secteur, considérant le facteur *potestas* tout comme le facteur *auctoritas* qui sont propres à la théorie politique classique. Plus concrètement, l'hypothèse à démontrer est que le contexte exige différents modèles de leadership selon le niveau de responsabilité des agents de gestion et le niveau d'institutionnalisation et le pouvoir de l'organisation dans lequel ils développent leur travail.

MOTS-CLEFS : gestion publique, leadership, théorie administrative, méthodologie administrative.

LIDERANÇA NO SETOR PÚBLICO: ALGUMAS QUESTÕES TEÓRICAS A METODOLÓGICAS

RESUMO: Baseando-se na literatura existente e nos debates mais relevantes que vêm se realizando – tanto no âmbito académico como no dos gestores –, sobre liderança no âmbito público, o artigo propõe um modelo analítico inovador para estudar este tema crucial. Para desenvolver a análise, inicia-se com uma proposta de diferenciação entre a gestão pública e a privada, de natureza incremental, e centrada nas especificidades derivadas dos objetivos de um e outro setor. Em seguida, desenvolve-se um modelo compreensivo que tem como finalidade identificar as variáveis circunstanciais próprias de tal setor, considerando tanto o fator *potestas* como o de *auctoritas* próprios da teoria política clássica. Concretamente, a hipótese que se pretende demonstrar é que o contexto demanda diferentes modelos de liderança considerando o nível de responsabilidade dos gestores e o nível de institucionalização e poder da organização onde os gestores desenvolvem seu trabalho.

PALAVRAS CHAVE: gestão pública, liderança, teoria administrativa, metodologia administrativa.

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ABSTRACT: Despite its pertinence in administrative sciences, leadership in public management is still ill conceptualized. In this context, the authors propose an analytical framework to reconsider the study of public leadership. To explore this issue they begin by stating the difference between public and private management and look at the specifics of public management's objectives. Then, they try to develop a comprehensive model to understand the variety of situations in public leadership; a model based on a broader perspective rather than on a managerial one. In particular, they defend the idea that different types of leadership are required depending on the level of responsibility of the managers and other aggregate variables such as the level of institutionalization and power of the public organization where the managers work.

KEYWORDS: Public management, leadership, administrative theory, administrative methodology.

Introduction

Studies of public management in the last thirty years, and especially in research into modernisation and change in Public Administrations, have demonstrated the weakness of the "leadership" variable in explaining the successes and failures of transformation. Much has been written concerning the importance of leadership in the literature on management, but in the explanations of change this variable has not been adequately considered. Paradigm shifts, from the bureaucratic (Weber, 1984) to the "new public management" (Aucoin, 1995; Barzelay, 2001; Lane, 2000; Pollit and Bouckaert, 2000; Savas, 2008; Osborne and Gaebler, 1992, among others) and, more recently, to the "neopublic" (Frederickson, 1997; CLAD, 1998; Merino, 2008; Gregory, 2003; Hood et al., 2004; Peters, 2001, 2006, 2007, among others) have culminated in the early years of the XXI century in an integrationist and syncretic vision (Bourgon, 2007, 2010)¹. At a more micro level it is also clear that numerous public organizations in very different countries have made advances in effectiveness, efficiency, integrity, and

¹ Without forgetting by any means the importance of efficiency and the achievement of policy results (Longo, 2008), it is nowadays necessary to foster civic results, which leads to the democratisation of the Administration and the quest for good government i.e. "receptive, responsible and respected government", as described by Jocelyne Bourgon in her "new" theory of public administration (Bourgon, 2007, 2010).

transparency, but in explanations of such changes and transformations—both paradigmatic and organizational—leadership is not a key variable and, consequently, due to its inadequate analysis, no advances are made in the understanding of how these changes are led.

What is the reason for this neglect or omission? Is not leadership an essential variable in the explanation of change? Nobody denies its importance, yet its study is marginal. The most serious aspect of this vacuum is that, for public management, it leaves us unable to contribute prescriptions as to how to lead change, despite the essence of public management being the production of theory useful for managers. To the question of how to lead change in public organizations towards an integrationist and democratic paradigm of public service, the response is that we have no scientifically validated answers, and thus it is important to find solutions to this insufficiency.

Our two initial hypotheses to explain this fact are, firstly, that there are few theories of public sector leadership sufficiently adapted to the axiological public framework and to its structural differences. Secondly, that when these do exist, they do not consider important contingency variables, but are excessively omnicomprehensive theories which aim to be useful for both the management of governments and for the management of highly technified public agencies, and for both organisms with a strong capacity for coercion and regulatory elaboration and for quasi-corporate/business organisms.

Consequently, we believe that one of the causes of the relative omission of leadership as a key explanatory variable of change is the absence of theories of public leadership at intermediate level (Merton, 1957)² which are sufficiently sensitive to public values and adapted to the different public environments so as to be adopted by academics studying this sector as instruments explaining reality. What is required are solid theories which possess an empirically testable explanatory value, are internally and externally consistent and possess predictive capacity and precision (Bunge, 2002). The theoretical weakness of public sector leadership has meant that data regarding the importance of public management in explaining change cannot be adequately interpreted, and thus facts important for the rigorous understanding of changes have not been sufficiently analysed. Precisely to fill this vacuum we modestly offer an analytical framework of an intermediate level which we understand to be empirically testable and

² "Our major task today is to develop special theories applicable to limited conceptual ranges [...] rather than to seek the total conceptual structure that is adequate to derive these and other theories of the middle range" (Merton, 1957, p. 51).

which could contribute knowledge to this scientific area, not only for the explanation of reality but also for the improved training of public managers in their different levels of responsibility and environments.

What follows will attempt, having described the state of the question in studies of public management, to demonstrate that differences exist between public and private sector leadership. However, these differences, when the varied public and private organizational worlds are adequately segmented, will be seen not to be absolute except in the purely archetypal organisation of the public and the private. In short, these differences are located on a continuum rather than being abrupt and clearly divided. We shall then attempt to synthesize the epistemological and methodological foundations of public administration as a scientific discipline, essentially with the objective of understanding the scientific framework or paradigm in which this text is located. The central contribution of the article is what we term the contextual model of public leadership, which is an attempt to contribute some mediating variables which permit the selection of theories of public leadership in such a way that they are sensitive to the public dimension and, at the same time, sufficiently adapted to the different contexts and levels of responsibility of public managers. Finally, we shall use this model to analyze proposals and theories of public leadership which are currently widely followed, to be able to demonstrate how it enriches the undeniable contributions of these theories.

Briefly, the text aims to contribute understanding and analytical capacity to studies of public leadership, in the hope that they will continue to empirically test some of their proposals and thereby contribute a more solid and useful theoretical framework to studies of change or modernisation in Public Administrations. We believe an improved theory will permit a better interpretation of reality and thereby help to rediscover the importance and characteristics of public leadership. Increased information regarding leaderships of excellence will subsequently permit improved training upon the basis of successful experiences. Finally, improved training in public management will produce better managers who will contribute decisively to constructing a more democratic, effective and integrated administration.

Public leadership: The state of the art

The literature on leadership is abundant in management, not so far in *public* management (Van Wart, 2003). Yet quantity does not always mean quality, and certainly does not ensure usefulness for public managers. Moreover, poor literature on leadership generates even more problems than it solves by leading naive public managers to follow



seemingly sensible rules, which actually lead them to the edge of disaster. But the problem is that even excellent management texts can mislead public managers. Most leadership theories and concepts are generic, not having been developed and tested in the public context (Fernández, 2008, p. 176). As a consequence, the idea that leadership can be generally spoken of in the public sector, and be targeted at any public in that sector is, in our view, erroneous. And what seems even more erroneous is the no-

tion that one can write about leadership without making distinctions between the public and private sectors. When addressed to all types of audiences alike, texts with the necessary rigor and with enough of an empirical basis may uncover flanks where it becomes possible and even necessary to disqualify them.

Usually, the explanations of change and continuity in the public sector have been organized around two kinds of theories: Systemic and institutional. Governmental changes

were the consequence of systemic changes, i.e. adaptation of the political subsystem to environmental changes such as economic globalization, and increasing complexity, interdependence and diversity (Luhmann, 1982; Kooiman, 1993). Or the special characteristics of the changes and the troublesome continuity of some inefficient public administrations should be understood using different institutional theories: Historical, organizational, sociological, etc. (Peters, 1998). As a consequence, leadership has been fairly often neglected as a source of explanation of change in the public sector. The reason behind this omission is the idea that bureaucracies are guided by powerful forces beyond the control of administrative leaders. For example, in the research on New Public Management it is difficult to find the "leadership factor" as an explanation of success or failure. There are exceptions (i.e. Barzelay, 2001) but they are few. In this text we defend that leadership in the public sector is very important to explain change and continuity. Even more, we agree with the idea that "leadership from public managers is necessary because without leadership public organizations will never mobilize themselves to accomplish their mandated purposes" (Behn, 1998, p. 209). But public leadership should be understood in the context of the political system, not only with the conceptual and cognitive frame of management.

The thousands of books and articles on leadership can be organized in six theories according to Van Wart (2003):

1. *Great man*; this theory emphasized the idea of leadership as a special character or some mixture of qualities only possessed by extremely talented individuals, whose decisions are sometimes capable of radically changing the path of history (Galton, 1869). These ideas, applied to political leaders, have been defended by very important philosophers (Berlin, 2002; Ortega y Gasset, 2005).
2. *Trait*; this theory emphasized the importance of individual traits (physical, motivational, personality) and skills. It is very similar to the previous theory but influenced by scientific methodologies –see, for example, later than the original works of this theory, McClelland (1987) and his theory of intrinsic "power motivation", which is very influential on the competency approach to human resources management, or the research by Zaccaro and his idea that leadership traits are "relatively coherent and integrated patterns of personal characteristics, reflecting a range of individual differences, that foster consistent leadership effectiveness across a variety of group and organizational situations" (2007, p. 7).
3. *Contingency*; these theories emphasized the situational variables leaders must deal with, criticizing the idea of a universal set of traits associated with effective leadership. They look for effective leadership behavior. In order to find it, for example, researchers at Ohio

State University administered questionnaires to thousands of employees to identify successful styles of behavior. They identified two broad categories of leadership behavior: consideration (or concern for the welfare of subordinates) and initiating structure (concern for the accomplishment of goals). Later, this theory was refined in different ways, such as the contingency theory (Fiedler, 1967; Vroom and Yetton, 1967; Hersey and Blanchard, 1977). And more recently, research on leadership behavior has identified a third category of behavior (Lindell and Rosenqvist, 1992): Development oriented behavior (concern for experimentation, innovation and organizational change), behavior which is connected with the next theory we are going to summarize. 4. *Transformational*; this theory emphasizes the idea that leaders should have a compelling vision and must create change in the organization (Bennis and Nanus, 2001; Kotter, 1988, Bass, 1990). Some of the authors, however, defend a new charismatic leadership with behaviors such as (Javidan and Waldman, 2003, pp. 230-1): a) Articulation of a future vision; b) Building credibility and commitment to the vision; c) Creating emotional challenges for followers. These leaders should also have personal attributes such as self-confidence, eloquence, high energy and determination and desire for change and risk taking. Other transformational followers emphasize cultural change as the key to effective leadership (Peters and Waterman, 1982). 5. *Servant*, this theory emphasizes the ethical responsibilities to followers (affective leadership: Newman et al., 2009), stakeholders and society (Greenleaf, 1977; McGregor Burns, 1983). 6. *Multifaceted or holistic*; this theory emphasizes the importance of integrating the major schools, especially the transactional (trait and behavior) and transformational schools, and the need of looking for cross-fertilization among them (Bass, 1990).

According to Van Wart (2003, p. 221) there are five possible definitions of leadership in an Administrative context:

1. Administration leadership is the process of providing the results required by authorized processes in an efficient, effective and legal manner (endorsed by those who defend a strict political accountability, such as Terry, 1995, 1998; or Moe and Gilmour, 1995, among others);
2. Administrative leadership is the process of developing/supporting followers who provide the results (endorsed by those who defend affective leadership such as Newman et al., 2009, among others);
3. Administrative leadership is the process of aligning the organization with its environment, especially the necessary macro-level changes necessary, and realigning the culture as appropriate (endorsed by those who defend entrepreneurial leadership such as Behn, 1998, or Kotter, 1988, among others);
4. The key element of administrative leadership is its service focus or its ethical mission (en-

dorsed by those who defend ethical leadership such as Cooper and Wright, 1992; Ricucci, 1995, and Frederickson, 1997, among others); 5. Administrative leadership is a composite of providing technical performance, internal direction to followers, external organization direction – all with a public service orientation. We consider this last definition very close to our own idea, but it is true that it eschews the tough decision about defining the proper emphasis or focus that leaders must make. In this paper we shall attempt to create a model for defining emphasis considering two kinds of variables: The need of legitimation and the level of institutionalization of the organization where the leader must work.

In this article we follow the ideas set by Stone when he concluded that the complexity and variations in positions and public organizations produced “limitless permutations and combinations” in public leadership (1945, p. 210). Later Terry (1995) has criticized the lack of consideration of normative issues in the leadership literature when applied directly to the public administration. For example, the blithe defense of the neo-managerial approach in public leadership can be very harmful from the perspective of democratic accountability (Terry, 1998; Moe, 1994; Reich, 1988). Some others contend (Javidan and Waldman, 2003; Dobell, 1989) that the assumption of certain ideas from the charismatic school of leadership is not very well suited for certain public environments (i.e. organizations with bureaucratic forms of structure and governance) and for certain levels of managers (especially middle managers). Although we tend to agree with these ideas it is important to consider the variation in positions and the differences among public organizations in order to have a more accurate vision of public leadership. The need for a more comprehensive model comes also from our experience as professors in dozens of courses for managers in the public sector in Spain and especially from the more than 200 interviews conducted with these managers along more than ten years³. Many times we have explained the theory of

contingency and its variants, but managers from organizations where outputs and outcomes are hard to measure have nearly always asked us the same thing, “How can I know the true degree of maturity of the employees who report to me, except in the most outstanding cases, if I am unable to establish a minimally reliable evaluation performance system?”. The answer is not simple in their organizations, which Wilson identified as “coping organizations” (1989, p. 168).

Many executive managers also ask how this theory helps to manage the political environment in which they must interact, for instance, with members of Parliament or the press. The answer could be to remind them that other leadership theorists have made interesting contributions of the analysis of power, which when added to contingency theory can set a fairly solid groundwork. We have therefore explained to them how to define the scope of political power, what their own potential sources of power are, and how to use them (Pfeffer, 1992). Once we have put this forward, we are usually asked whether that means anything goes, as long as one reaches or stays in power, or whether there are any moral constraints (although the ends may be legitimate) on government activity. This leads us to remind them of the significance of normative theory as a framework for action for both the government and for public administration. Then the question we get is how to make “realism” in managing power compatible with the “idealism” of normative theory. In short, things get very messy if we chose only one theory as the way for effective leadership. The option for a holistic approach is the best way, but it has the problem of context and position, that is: When to give priority to one theory or other considering the context of the organization or the responsibility of the manager?

This is why we feel that if one wants to build a leadership theory that is useful for public managers and elected officials, much more emphasis should be placed on critical detail, and more work should be done on the differences between organizations and levels of responsibility, rather than on trying to generate universally applicable theories. We expand on this theme in the following pages. First, it is important to clarify the distinction between public and private leadership in order to understand whether what is written about business leadership does apply to the public sector, and whether it makes sense to write about

³ Manuel Villoria is the Director of a Master in Public Leadership at the Ortega and Gasset Institute. The Master has 20 editions now and more than 500 managers have studied the Master. Every student has to have an in depth interview with the director of the Master at the beginning of the course. During the interview, there are two open questions related to public leadership: 1. What do you think is public leadership? 2. What are the most important attributes of a public leader? During the last ten years we have conducted 262 interviews, more or less 26 each year. The classification of the managers interviewed is: 21 executive managers from central and regional governments; 29 central government middle managers (10 of them from agencies and public companies); 122 regional middle managers (62 of them from public companies and agencies in the regional government); 50 local middle managers (21 of them from public companies and agencies in the local level); 25 high

ranking officials from the army and police; 5 top ranking officials from the army and police; 10 foreign managers. They come not only from the three different levels of government, but also from very different areas of government. Their ideas of leadership were slightly different depending on the organization where they worked and the level of responsibility they had.

public management. Then, one must examine how one can build the “science” of public management, and how one can use that science to develop a science of leadership. It also becomes necessary to clarify whether what is written for a President or Head of State is also useful to a member of a Senior Executive Service, to a “middle manager” to a mayor, or the reverse. We should also ask ourselves if the theories which work in a public company could work in a ministry or in the army. In short, we will attempt to clarify some concepts and define variables that allow one to properly apply different theories.

Public and private management: A controversy revisited

In order to determine what is to be managed in the public sector, we must first answer the question as to whether or not there is any difference between managing public and private organizations. We can begin by asking what the literature has to say in this regard. Traditional organization theory puts no emphasis at all on this difference. Neither Weber nor Taylor, nor McGregor were concerned with bringing out these differences. In one of his later papers, Simon (1995) asserts that public, private and non-governmental organizations are equivalent in their critical dimensions. Research, in this field, shows, for instance, that the main factor affecting the behavior of bureaucrats is not whether the organization is publicly or privately owned, but rather size (Rainey, 1997).

Some authors bring out the fact that several public organizations are structured like companies: Public companies, semi-autonomous agencies, public business enterprises and the like, obtaining income from providing their services (Musolf y Seidman, 1980). Others have brought out the public side of third sector organizations or the special relationship with the public sector that private sector companies working almost exclusively for the public sector as contractors have (Bozeman, 1987). There are people in public and private enterprise that do essentially the same

thing (Mitnick, 1994) or, to put it differently, public and private management are similar in every unimportant matter (Allison, 1992). Moreover, management of a host of services occurs due to the interconnection of public, private and non-governmental organizations (Kettl, 1993). Although only certain public organizations can approve rules binding for all, it is equally true that without the support of NGOs and even private enterprise, in many cases, the policies or programs approved in legislation could not be implemented (Rainey, 1997). There are even public organizations and administrations that act so much in their own interest, or that of *lobbies*, that they are not at all different from private enterprises (Banfield, 1975).

A *continuum* from private enterprise to ministries exists as Dahl and Lindblom have stated (1976). A *continuum* (see Table 1) which includes:

- 1) pure private enterprise,
- 2) private enterprise subject to general labor or other types of regulations,
- 3) private enterprise with public funds in the form of contracts,
- 4) highly regulated companies,
- 5) private companies whose largest sources of income comes from the public sector,
- 6) private companies depending entirely on public contracts,
- 7) government agencies whose programs are produced almost entirely by private outsourcing,
- 8) mixed public-private enterprise,
- 9) majority publicly owned enterprise –more than fifty per cent of the shares–,
- 10) public business entity or regulatory agency,
- 11) independent body, and,
- 12) Ministry or City Government.

We must therefore acknowledge that the problem of ownership and control has no simple solution, although recent research stresses the differences even in the management of health services, between public and private hospitals (Chubb and Moe, 1990). Based on this research (Scott and Meyer, 1991; Rainey et al., 1976; Mitnick, 1994; Knott, 1993; Gusfield, 1981; Benn and Gaus, 1983; Allison 1992), Rainey indicates no fewer than thirty three differences between public and private management (Rainey, 1997,

TABLE 1. From private to public management: A continuum.

PRIVATE										PUBLIC	
Pure private enterprise	Private Enterprise subject to general labor or other types of regulations	Private enterprise with public funds in the form of contracts	Highly regulated companies	Private companies whose largest sources of income come from the public sector. And NGOs	Private companies depending entirely on public contracts	Government agency whose programs are subcontracted	Mixed public-private enterprise	Majority publicly owned enterprise: more than 50% of the shares	Public business entity; Service agencies	Independent body or regulatory agency	President Ministry, mayor

Source: Based on Dahl and Lindblom.

p. 73), of which we would highlight the following eight distinguishing public management characteristics:

- greater political influence;
- quasi-legislative and quasi-legal capacity;
- greater expectations for equitable and equal treatment and for transparency;
- greater ambiguity and/or contradiction in objectives;
- greater constraints in public manager decision-making, both inwards and outwards;
- greater difficulty in linking incentives to performance;
- slightly different value system related to work;
- lower level of employee satisfaction.

Along these lines, Subirats (1990, 1991) cites fourteen similar differences that should be considered also in a continuum. But another consequence of this theory of levels of "publicness" is that we have to agree with certain authors who defended the similarities between public and private organizations. Of course, there are similarities, especially between NGOs, public enterprises, certain agencies and private companies highly regulated, and, obviously, there are more similarities in the "how to achieve ends" than in the "what are the ends".

Developing a *public management science*

What is *public management*?

If there are differences between public and private management, then there is reason to believe there can be independent scientific approaches with characteristics of their own. Thus, according to Bozeman (1993), the origins of public management can be traced from different perspectives. On the one hand is the so-called *P-approach* stemming from the public policy schools. Then there is the *B-approach*, with its origins in business schools. Here, the distinction between public and private becomes blurry and the focus tends to be on the management process, i.e. organization, personnel, budgeting, and the like. What the two have in common is a concern that goes beyond the mere internal administration of agencies, a respect for the role of policy in management, a prescriptive orientation, and an affinity for learning through experience.

In a nutshell, the public management's objective is to generate a theory to give managers an indication of how to act in different environments and situations and to identify and teach the skills needed to satisfactorily put this theory

into practice (Perry and Kraemer, 1990; Perry, 1996). In this context, the leadership literature must give thought to whom it is addressing in each individual case and examine the teaching that may be useful accordingly, instead of succumbing to the tendency to put all managers in the same frame of reference.

Methodology and epistemology

One of the greatest concerns of both teachers and researchers of this approach is that of generating useful and directly applicable information. This raises a significant control issue since people easily abuse the knowledge of experienced managers and succumb to profit and a lack of rigor (Lynn, 1996). Knowledge in the public management literature is not always methodologically scientific, but rather a great portion is theoretical, homespun, descriptive, and personal, comprising a body of what can be called "wise" literature (Bozeman, 1993). This literature is different from common sense or ordinary knowledge of public administration and is based on personal experience, stereotypes and institutionalized knowledge. It is based on a synthesis of studies or on systematically conveyed personal experience, validated by the scientific community itself and supervised for publication by those who revise scientific literature. Allison (1971), Bozeman and Straussman (1990), and Benn and Gaus (1983) are some excellent examples of this so-called "wise" literature.

Finally, there is the type of scientific knowledge that tends to arise from following up on the typical process of theory generation. Hypotheses that can be disproved are put forward, analytical tools are developed to explain them, there is an aspiration for them to be generalized, it is assumed that they can be significantly aggregated in the analysis process, a degree of separation is established between facts and values, and it is assumed that progress of the theory can be demonstrated. This is literature that seeks to generate theory. In the view of Bozeman (1993), both sources of knowledge are useful in public management. The problem is how to integrate them. Wise and scientific literature cannot be lumped into the same category since this would take us back to the 1930s and those famous proverbs of administration identified by critics.

Thus far, research in public management has been characterized by a series of traits (Kettl, 1993), which, to a large extent, arose as the immediate precursors of the public management approach: 1) there has been a conscious rejection of research on implementation and bureaucracy, whereas the methodological bias has been on research on the strategic approach of business schools; 2) in the face of research pessimism regarding implementation, this

approach has offered an optimistic, results-oriented image; 3) high level government executives and their strategy-generating roles have served as an analysis units for research; 4) knowledge has been developed through case studies. Four types of problems have been detected in this research strategy (Kettl, 1993). First, while the tendency to focus on high-ranking executives simplifies things since one can work on similarities, it impoverishes the results. Second, not enough research has been done on types of public management that differ from traditional ministerial or agency service providers. There is a lack of knowledge, for instance, on sub-contracted public services. Third, there is not enough knowledge on different management models according to governmental grades or areas. Fourth, knowledge is lacking on management in the middle levels of the public administration. We feel that these assertions also apply for anyone having studied the literature on leadership in the public sector. Thus, there is a lack of attention paid to middle management, advice is mixed for different levels of government executives, and there is not enough understanding of indirect management and what it represents.

Generally speaking, the methods that have been used in public management research are social science methods (Perry and Kraemer, 1990). *Management* research has been based on varied strategies (Behn, 1993). Both in private and public management, *experimental design* has been very hard to implement. Hawthorne experiments show that even with everything working in favor of an innovation, what was proven was exactly the contrary of what was intended (Mayo, 1946). Exercising total control is virtually impossible in the public sector. *Quasi-experimental* models have been more common. *Surveys* have not helped much to generate knowledge, particularly when managers do not know their own work very well (Mintzberg, 1979, cited by Behn, 1993). Research based on managers' *systematic exposure* to their work (manager-philosopher research), including highly influential examples such as Barnard (1959), entail validity problems. *Gedanke* or great thinkers' research, based on logic rather than empirical research, and based on general knowledge and highly potent rationality, such as the research that gave rise to some of the most prestigious works by Weber, Simon and Lindblom, is only within the reach of the most illustrious minds. Research based on *observation and interviews*, such as the famous research done by Mintzberg on the work of executive management (1978), raises the issue of selection, since one can choose what works and reject what does not, thereby missing out on significant information. *Case studies* not only intend to bring out facts, but also find the underlying principles explaining why a combination of specific activities,

interacting with specific circumstances, lead to given results, and to describe these principles so that they can be applied in other situations. Kaufman's research (1960) on the *U.S. Forest Service* stands as an example.

Other research strategies with a more interpretational approach have been developed. A very interesting current of research is what is known as "action learning" (Morgan, 1997, p. 299). It is based on the desire to recount, through the use of metaphors that help understand reality, interventions that can produce "generalizable keys" and that are also pertinent to better understand the intervention process as well as the essential dynamics, options and problems that have been tackled. Generally speaking, it is very important to understand the role of language in this process since ideas are based on implicit images or metaphors which induce us to see, comprehend and manage situations along a given path (Morgan, 1997; Barzelay & Armajani, 1992; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). A different, more descriptive yet very interesting strategy aims to generate meaning through stories that organizations tell themselves (Maynard-Moody and Kelly, 1993). Findings based on the analysis of these stories, based on building the entire process of generating meaning, are highly relevant both scientifically and in terms of theory (Bellavita, 1990).

In the final analysis, some people believe that in all public management is, particularly on a strategic level, as in political action, "art", intuition and improvisation, which no one can teach (Dror, 1983). Yet from the public management standpoint, the path to take is that of discovering theories, rules, and heuristics to help managers (Lynn, 1996). Although the building of leadership theories has used the different methodologies that have been put forward, one very common mistake is to overlook the fact that each theory generated pools from several specific sources for validation while forgetting other sources that probably make the theories useless under different circumstances.

A contextual model of public leadership

Within a democratic system, administrative positions are closely bound to legitimacy, both of origin and exercise. A lack of such legitimacy would challenge the access and sustenance of power. Furthermore, to hold an administrative position is linked to a variety of special duties and limited domains. In the political theory there exist two concepts, such as *auctoritas* and *potestas*, which help to understand this fact. *Auctoritas* implies that those who hold power have to be legitimized by means of their capacity to meet citizens' expectations. That is to say, to be able to develop a legitimate political discourse, to make the right

choices in strategy and to achieve results. However, *potestas* is more related to the power source, has to do with the space and time in which is possible to exercise power in accordance with the constitutional or legal framework. When analysing public leadership the ontological dimensions of space and time of rule should not be neglected. From an etymological perspective, *rex* (King) and *regnum* (Kingdom) have both of them an Indo-European origin which refer themselves to the capacity to define the limits of the *civitas* or space where power is exercised (Marramao, 2009). Otherwise, the exercise of public leadership is done within spatial and temporal borders and, by all means, those borders are defined through a variety of implicit and explicit mandates which frame the mission, tasks, and responsibilities of those who hold managerial positions in an organisation.

It could be argued that studies on public leadership place the emphasis on analysing the leader's *autoritas* rather than his/her *potestas*. Power and freedom are concepts unavoidably linked each other. All real power is related to free individuals who voluntarily accept to obey. If so, such obedience is connected to the dimension of *autoritas* which explains the reasons to obey, but *potestas*, or the space and temporal framework in which the exercise of power takes place, is also to be included. It is not the same to be mayor in a city than to be the chief of the municipal register and it is not the same the President or the Prime Minister of a national government than a member of the senior executive service. They have different responsibilities and different *potestas*, they have different origin in their positions and different need of *auctoritas*. These two variables permit us to better understand public leadership.

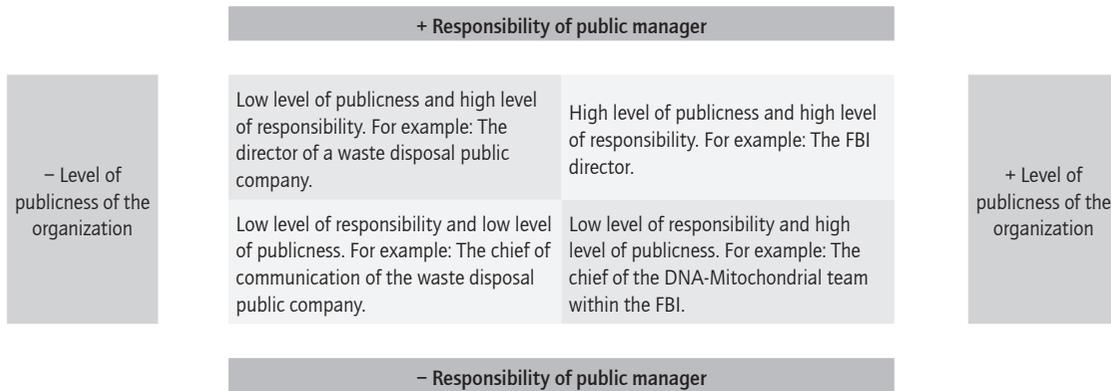
In the *dimension potestas* we could integrate two sub-variables: One is organizational and the other is individual. The first sub-variable is the level of "publicness" or "institutionalization" of the organization where the manager works. We think that the organization as the unit of analysis is critical in leadership (Cook, 1998, p. 228). Organizational structure shapes the behavior of the individuals and institutions within them (Merton, 1957). Plans and visions are different if the organization is an instrumental agency or a public company than if the organization is a Ministry or a Secretary of State. The instrumental nature is different because a public company usually has a very narrow mission but a Secretary of State has a much more open mission and conflicting responsibilities. According to Selznick (1949), leaders are supposed to define the mission of the organization and protect its distinctive character, leaders must defend the organization. Institutionalization is understood in this paper as the degree of power granted to the organization by the law, the amplitude of stakeholders and

conflicting values in decision-making, the quasi-legislative and *adjudication* capacity granted to the organization and its officials, the legislative and legal controls in decision-making. Getting back to the distinction made earlier, it is not the same thing to manage family business selling sports equipment as it is to manage a team of investigators in the FBI. The latter can affect fundamental rights and attempt on citizen's freedom with the legal support of the State. There are different levels of institutionalism or "publicness" that determine leader's options. As much power granted to the organization much control is needed. And the leader, in order to protect the mission and character of her organization, uses the power and suffers the controls that are granted to that organization. Even more, managers must protect the jurisdictional boundaries of their agencies, and defend their autonomy from other rival agencies and political restrictions hampering them in their action (Terry, 1995, p. 99). Concluding, managers make decisions that authoritatively allocate values, but the organizational environment determines what decisions can be made and how they can be made (Wilson, 1989).

The second sub-variable in the dimension *potestas* is the level of responsibility of the manager. "Level of responsibility" could be understood as the realm of authority over one or several policies, formal legitimacy for decision-making, and independence or non-dependence from superiors granted by the law or the internal norms of the organization. The degree of validity of advice or guidance varies enormously in relation to this variable. Certain advice that may be useful to a deputy minister is not useful to a middle level manager in a bureaucracy or a *street-level bureaucrat*. In terms of *potestas* there are important differences between the different ranks in an organization and the leadership theory espoused should consider this situation. Putting together the two sub-variables we find a most accurate picture of the position of a manager in the public sector (see Figure 1), because an executive manager in a public company providing waste disposal services probably has less *potestas* than a middle manager in an agency like the FBI, where the mission he has to defend is: "To protect and defend the United States against terrorist and foreign intelligence threats, to uphold and enforce the criminal laws of the United States, and to provide leadership and criminal justice services to federal, state, municipal, and international agencies and partners"⁴. The organizational environment influences the level of *potestas* and the kind of leadership the manager should prioritize.

⁴ www.fbi.gov/quickfacts.htm.

FIGURE 1. Level of *potestas*.



The situation changes when we analyze the *dimension auctoritas*. The *auctoritas* is neither established by the law nor stabilized by the institutional design. It has to be achieved and built through the process of legitimation. For us, *auctoritas* is the degree of acceptance of the organizational and individual *potestas* by the stakeholders. Every organization and every manager need *auctoritas*. But the need of it is different depending on two sub-variables. The first sub-variable is the need of legitimation of the organization. The second is the level of responsibility of the manager.

The need of legitimation implies the need of providing legitimacy. According to Max Weber (1984), legitimation is the process of making something acceptable and normative to a group. The mission and existence of public organizations need to be acceptable to the stakeholders they have. But some organizations need more legitimation than others. This need depends on multiple factors; for example, sometimes the norms and values in a given society strongly support the mission of an organization, but do not support as clearly the mission of other. And some organizations need a more technical legitimation and others need a more political or economic one. The kind of legitimation is different considering the mission of the organization and its level of publicness.

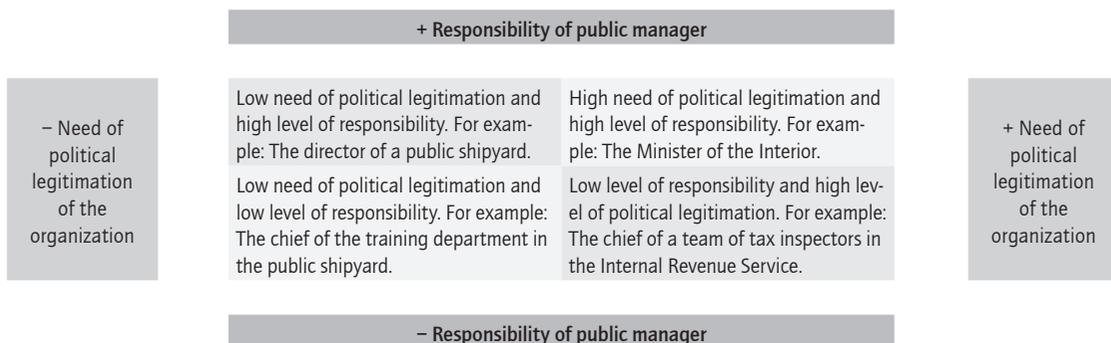
The second sub-variable is individual, not organizational; it is, again, the level of responsibility of the manager. In terms of the need of *auctoritas* there are important differences between the different ranks in an organization and the leadership theory espoused should consider this situation. A middle manager in a public company has lower need of *auctoritas* than the CEO; the top executive of the company needs economic legitimation in order to keep his job and the existence of the company. The middle manager in the police needs technical legitimation nor political. But the need of political legitimation of the Minister of the Interior is really big.

Putting together the two sub-variables (see Figure 2) we could find a more accurate picture of the leadership needs of public managers. The organizational environment influences, again, the need of *auctoritas* and the kind of it the manager should prioritize.

The entrepreneurial leadership and the contextual model

One of the underlying problems with the leadership literature is probably that words with a host of meanings are used without clarifying definition. For example, one equivocal notion is that of *innovation*, a very important notion in

FIGURE 2. The need of *auctoritas*.



the concept of the entrepreneurial model of leadership. In the abundant literature, it is not clear whether innovation is a product or a process, an idea taken from others or a discovery. In addition, contrary to many erroneous postulates, innovation is a collective process in which networks are a key to production. Zaltman et al. (1973) identify five types of innovation which often converge: Product, process, organizational, personnel, and policy. In short, innovation involves changes of a highly varied nature.

In the public sector, innovation usually comes about according to the following criteria (Ballart, 2001): 1) in most cases it is not planned and adheres more to Behn's *grouping along* model (1988) than to planning models; 2) it has its roots in the organization's idea of its mission rather than in specific laws or mandate; 3) it usually consists of adapting old ideas and practices to new problems; 4) it is not radical, but rather incremental; and 5) most innovations are currently focused on such objectives as listening to the users of services, giving greater management power to executives and producing information on results.

Now we are going to examine the concept of innovation with the contextual model proposed before. First, we are going to examine it considering the *level of responsibility* in the dimension *potestas*. Authors that write on innovative leadership normally propose that implementation of innovation be controlled and non-conflictive. Ideas may arise openly and creatively, but must be put into practice in an orderly fashion. This contradicts the idea that innovation can arise at any level within an organization. Thus, if a team leader of social workers in a department of the local government is presented with ideas like those that Moore explains in his book *Creating Public Value* (1995), we could find that, if taken literally, that person would be legitimated in attempting to create value on his level, even in rebelling against rules or decisions made by superiors for the sake of defending specific individuals in urgent need. Although this may seem correct—because each social worker has a limited set of *stakeholders* who would be the ones to indicate or define their expectations for his action and who would lead him to defend these interests—this in practice could not lead policies to be implemented according to general criteria. In all likelihood, this would outstretch the values and general criteria for action contained in the original policy, which does not only consider the interests of these players, but also those of many others. This fragmentation of interests may make it impossible to correctly apply the policy decided upon by democratically elected officials. Obviously, the local elected can innovate, transforming social programs and introducing new visions in the organization. Summarizing, the team leaders do not have *potestas* for that kind of innovation, but the elected

officials do. It does not mean that these team leaders cannot introduce affective leadership and emotional labor in their job: They should listen, communicate clearly the mission of the organization, assess the emotional environment of the situation, and perform and adapt accordingly (Newman et al., 2009). In this kind of social organizations it is very important to create positive affect because emotionally detached and low-affect manager can create many organizational problems (Kiel and Watson, 2009, p. 22). They do have *potestas* for that. Finally, we continuously hear talk of how important it is for leaders to understand and design the culture of an organization according to the values they proclaim (cultural innovation). Yet cultures change from the top levels of an organization and it takes time and success for its employees to take on its basic assumptions (Schein, 1985). A middle manager cannot change the culture of an organization. Again, these proposals hold true for the top but not the middle levels.

Considering the *level of publicness* of the organization in the dimension *potestas*, it is not the same an organization with high level of institutionalization than one with lower level. For example, if we told that a head of a tax team to be enterprising, what would we actually be asking of him? Of course, he could innovate, but his innovations or creation of value are highly limited by the set of rules that he must be aware of and abide by, and by citizens rights which he must respect (Moe and Gilmour, 1995). As citizens, what we probably expect is not innovation, but rather technical skills, equity and independence. We might even fear that their innovation could have a disastrous effect on our rights, and there are examples of this in all developed countries. The essential creation of value of these teams lies in their effective, honest compliance with their obligations. If they add on something else that benefits the community, all the better. But perhaps innovations in tax administration are better decided at the top levels of the agency and must be simply complied with on the other levels. According to Behn, "public managers can lead in pernicious as well as beneficial directions" (1998, p. 221), probably sometimes it is worth the risk of entrepreneurial management, but the more *potestas* is granted to the agency and the manager the less the risk is worthy. As a consequence, initiative in certain areas should be restricted.

Now we are going to use the *need of legitimation* in the dimension *auctoritas*. In a knowledge society technical innovation is important for technical legitimation; that's the reason why we, as taxpayers, ask for technical innovation in public research units or hospitals. The leader of a research unit or the head of a heart surgery unit in a hospital should look for technical/scientific innovation. They have

a need of technical legitimation and the way to achieve it is through scientific innovation. Their work is based on constant innovation, but their innovations are based on slow, controlled, incremental scientific advances that ensure that innovation does not lead to a waste in taxpayers' money in the first instance, or to unnecessary loss of life in the other. In short, the creation of value comes from ongoing, systematic research in a given professional area and not from what might be a hapless occurrence on a sleepless night. However, they are not legitimated to change the strategy of the organization where they work. On the contrary, we do not ask for technical innovation to our ministers or secretaries of State in the Ministry of the Interior but we demand from them effectiveness and respect for our freedoms. That means that we could demand from them a new vision of the organization's future if the situation is not good. And considering the dangers for our liberties the new policy should be democratically controlled and approved. We know that innovation in the security policy should be done under public scrutiny and political deliberation, and that it involves the legislative and the judicial powers. Summarizing, the legitimation of these members of government is political, based on trust, image, discourse, and effectiveness, it is not technical.

Finally, the *level of responsibility* in the dimension *auctoritas* could help us to better understand certain situations. First, the CEO of a public enterprise has the need of economic legitimation, because of that he should adopt enterprising leadership. That means introducing changes in the strategic orientation of the public company (Bennis, 1989; Kotter, 1988; Bryson, 1988; Moore, 1995), in a way essentially linked to what *new public management* puts forward, which is, geared towards improving efficiency or quality of organizations, creating management indicators and bolstering managers' power. But if innovation implies going outside the core mission of the company, then he has not *potestas* for that and he is trying to assume political legitimation. The company has a mission and changing the mission is a political decision that only the legislative power or the minister could make. The CEO does not need political legitimation and should not look for it. Second, since the US President or the Spanish Prime Minister have cumbersome responsibilities they need big doses of *auctoritas* to legitimate their mandate and fulfilling their mission. In order to have political legitimation (and to revalidate mandate) sometimes they have to innovate and take risk. Innovation is part of their job, but innovation in these levels of government has to do with vision and institutional design, not with indicators and micromanagement. Third, the executive managers of the most important agencies are usually political appointees. That implies a need of

political legitimation and not only technical one. They should help the President or Prime Minister to win the elections and in order to do that they need to be effective and efficient, even entrepreneurial, but they also have to know how to sell the good results. Fourth, probably for the middle managers in the Internal Revenue Service or the police their essential job would be the protection of his organization's mission, understood as what "is established by legislative mandates and other legally binding acts that grant authority to administrative agencies to act within a designated realm or field of action and to pursue specific policy objectives" (Terry, 1995, p. 81). That means prioritizing technical legitimation and taking very little entrepreneurial risk. As one of our interviewees⁵ put forward: "I have to accept the mission and the orders I receive, even if I think they are wrong. Anyway, I have certain discretion in how to accomplish the mission. There, in the implementation, I have certain room of maneuvering for innovation".

Conclusions

Literature on public leadership needs to find more contextual models in order to analyze the usefulness of the different leadership theories for specific situations. Not all the theories are useful always but all of them have interesting ideas that can be useful in the appropriate context. How to select the ideas and find the usefulness of them is the motive which has driven this paper. In this article we have defended that: 1. There are differences between public and private leadership. 2. The differences depend on the level of "publicness" of the organizations. 3. As a consequence, the differences have to be analyzed in a *continuum*. 4. These ideas lead us to postulate that one cannot purport to generate leadership theories that are entirely useful to both public and private managers. 5. Public organizations have also different levels of *potestas*; that means different level of institutional power granted to them by the law or the institutional design. The maximum institutional power implies quasi-legislative and *adjudication* capacity on areas which affect fundamental rights. 6. The more the institutional power of the organization the more important are the controls on the managers of the organization. In organizations with high levels of *potestas* the entrepreneurial leadership should not be prioritized, and the essential job of middle managers would be the protection of their organization's mission and the respect of law. Even top executive managers should be very careful with innovation in these kinds of organizations. 7. But in public organizations the *auctoritas* is also important; every organization and

⁵ General of the Spanish Guardia Civil (military police).

every manager need *auctoritas*. But the need of it is different depending on two sub-variables. The first sub-variable is the need of legitimation of the organization. The second is the level of responsibility of the manager. 8. Managers in public organizations should consider the need of legitimation of the organization where they work, and also the kind of legitimation their organization demands. Entrepreneurial leadership is not the best answer for managers in organizations which demand political legitimation. 9 The level of *potestas* and the need of *auctoritas* of the individual managers are important to decide which kind of leadership they prioritize. 10. Today, public leaders with high level of *potestas* and big need of *auctoritas* must boost participation and freedom of the citizens to whom their missions and objectives affect.

In his remarkable article, Van Wart concluded that "contemporary synthesis of public-sector leadership models that define the actual relationships of the numerous leadership competences in various environmental contexts are simply absent" (2003, p. 225). This article tries to provide a more comprehensive model for analyzing public leadership, introducing concepts from the political theory that could help to better understand the variety of situations and factors existing in the vast word of public leadership.

On the basis of these contributions, we believe that among other possible research, more context-specific and better segmented studies could be undertaken in an attempt to define the necessary competencies of public managers. The unstoppable advance of professional public management (Jiménez Asensio et al., 2009) requires increasingly detailed and rigorous studies of managerial competencies; we believe that this analytical framework will permit researchers in this field to perform studies which take account of the different levels of management and the diverse environments relevant to the definition of context-useful competencies.

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