



Put citizens first

Leadership and management in
the public sector with focus on
operational development

Recommendations from
the Danish Leadership and
Management Commission

— Ledelses
Kommissionen



Leadership makes a difference

The public sector in Denmark functions very well compared with most other countries. We can be proud of this. In order to maintain this high level, the public sector must continuously improve and adapt to change. Public managers must hold on to the classical virtues, while at the same time finding new ways forward for public authority, service and collaboration. As public-sector institutions and entities cannot go bankrupt, the call for change must come from within these institutions and entities. In particular from politicians and managers.

The framework for public leadership and management is based on the interaction between politicians, staff associations, administrations, employees and citizens. Public managers are responsible for developing and translating visions, coordinating initiatives and creating results that will make a difference for citizens. Therefore, public managers should have a scope for action through adequate leadership discretion.

Leadership makes a difference, and certain types of leadership and management initiatives have a specific impact. When public managers set the course and collaborate, stronger results can be achieved. Research has shown this, and we know it from practical experience. There is a huge potential in promoting better leadership and management in the public sector. This is the starting point for our work.

The Danish Leadership and Management Commission sees leadership and management as setting the course and creating results through, and with, others.

The tasks and work of the Danish Leadership and Management Commission
The Danish Leadership and Management Commission has been tasked with mapping and

analysing public management and making specific recommendations to enhance the quality of public management in the future.

For example, the Danish Leadership and Management Commission has:

- Visited more than 50 workplaces.
- Given presentations and talks at more than 50 conferences and theme meetings.
- Held four meetings with the Commission's monitoring group, comprising professional associations for public managers and important societal stakeholders.
- Organised a 'digital relay race' with participation by more than 100 public managers.
- Arranged a prize assignment competition with contributions from more than 50 students and young managers.
- Conducted a questionnaire survey of 2,000 public managers.
- Held a dialogue and received contributions from more than 20 researchers and management consultants.

The Danish Leadership and Management Commission has issued a number of publications, including a collection of cases based on visits to 12 workplaces, profiles of 12 public managers, an HR survey, questionnaire results and the publication Leadership Motivation and Enjoyment, all of which serve to inspire public managers to develop their own management competences. Finally, the Danish Leadership and Management Commission has published its final recommendations in a major report, and this publication is a shorter version of the report.

You will find all publications from the Danish Leadership and Danish Leadership and Management Commission at www.ledelseskom.dk.

— 7 statements from the Danish Leadership and Management Commission (the recommendations to leaders at all levels include both public managers and politicians):

- 1 The citizen should be centre stage
- 2 Politicians should have faith in leadership
- 3 The system of cooperation should be simplified
- 4 Leaders of leaders should manage and develop operations
- 5 Leaders at all levels should set the course
- 6 Leaders at all levels should set up the team
- 7 Leaders at all levels should develop their competences

The citizen should be centre stage

— The Danish Leadership and Management Commission recommends

- Public managers should ensure that value creation for citizens and society is key for their organisation.
- Public managers should ensure that the citizen focus is strong enough for employees to act it out in their daily work.
- Politicians and public managers at all levels should provide clear and coherent pathways across all relevant entities to the benefit of Danish citizens.
- Public managers should integrate citizens and the local community as active partners in task performance.

All public-sector management should create value for society. Citizens' interaction with the public sector is a reflection of this. Therefore, the citizen perspective should always have a clear focus in task performance. We are not the first to make this observation, but we can see that there is a long way to go before the citizen perspective actually permeates all management in the public sector.

The citizen perspective is present when public managers and employees take account of citizens' pathways across sectors and professional areas. Public managers should see to it that these transitions are efficient and considerate. For example, when changing the way tasks are organised, public managers should make sure that the changes are implemented across institutional borders.

Input

Only four out of ten public managers state that, to a high degree or a very high degree, they have sufficient information about other public institutions' activities that are important to the performance of their core task..

The Danish Leadership and Management Commission's questionnaire survey. Available (in Danish) at www.ledelseskom.dk.

External cooperation on innovation often leads to higher quality, not least when it comes to cross-institutional or international cooperation. This is no doubt one of the reasons why 79% of all public innovation is based on collaboration with one or more external parties.

Center for Public Innovation (2017) Memo to the Danish Leadership and Management Commission

Politicians should have faith in leadership

— The Danish Leadership and Management Commission recommends

- Politicians should see themselves as the board of directors of the public sector and be clear in setting goals and directions for how the public sector should serve Danish citizens.
- Politicians should be aware that change and innovation require leadership support.
- Politicians should acknowledge that leadership is often a better tool to deal with individual cases than new rules and procedures.
- Politicians should show respect for the task of implementation and should allow sufficient time to carry through political decisions.

Input

Around half of the public managers find political interest supportive, while one quarter see it as restrictive.

The Danish Leadership and Management Commission's questionnaire survey. Available (in Danish) at www.ledelseskom.dk.

All public tasks are subject to political leadership. And this is a good thing! At best, public tasks are performed by public managers and employees who respect the unequivocal responsibility of politicians to allocate resources and prioritise interests. However, politicians usually leave room for public managers and employees to make decisions. Consequently, it may be tempting for politicians to interfere when they get impatient or are dissatisfied. In particular, there are two situations in which politicians tend to restrict the discretion of public managers: When public managers are to implement reforms and major changes, and when individual cases enter the political agenda.

Reforms and major changes take time, because public managers and employees who are to translate the reforms into action need time to appreciate the changes and make sense of them. The bigger the changes, the more important is leadership. Innovative solutions, handling 'new' problems and creating solutions across known structures and organisations – these are all areas that require time and adequate leadership discretion.

When individual cases reveal inadequate or incorrect practice, politicians much too often resort to management tools that restrict the discretion of the public managers: regulations, process requirements and documentation requirements. Instead, politicians ought to insist on better leadership. Individual cases often concern the culture at a single workplace. Politicians can and should expect that public managers are able to perform. If not, in the most serious cases, the result may be dismissal of managers, while in other cases, leadership development or reorganisation can resolve the issue.

The system of cooperation should be simplified

— The Danish Leadership and Management Commission recommends

- The staff associations should help to ensure that agreements and dialogue in the system of cooperation primarily focus on creating value for citizens. We recommend a service check of the MED system (the system for employee participation) with this in mind.
- The staff associations should contribute to modernising and simplifying collective agreements and regulations on working hours in order to facilitate locally based, cross-disciplinary, flexible and efficient organisation of work to benefit citizens.

A relationship based on trust between public managers and employees is crucial to run a workplace where employees use their skills and competences, and where they develop and thrive. In Denmark, part of the dialogue between employers and employees is formalised in a fine-meshed system of agreements and cooperation on which Denmark spends considerable resources.

However, the system of cooperation does not always support employee involvement. Nor does it guarantee that the citizen perspective always comes first. This raises the question of how to ensure that all the substantial resources spent on the system of cooperation ultimately benefit citizens.

Furthermore, public managers as well as staff associations are calling for less control. There is a problem for both parties if there is a wish to organise work in cross-disciplinary teams, and regulations on working hours are an obstacle to this. More flexibility is needed in a time when tasks are increasingly performed in cross-disciplinary teams.

Input

There is great variation in the scope of the formal system for cooperation. For example, a region with 27,000 employees has up to 170 local participation committees (MED-udvalg), while a large Danish company with 17,000 employees only has three participation committees.

COWI (2018). Interview survey conducted for the Danish Leadership and Management Commission.

A survey by the National Research Centre for the Working Environment showed that one-third of public-sector employees rarely or never experience that their immediate manager involves them in the organisation of their work.

The National Research Centre for the Working Environment (2017). Memo to the Danish Leadership and Management Commission.

Leaders of leaders should manage and develop operations

— The Danish Leadership and Management Commission recommends

- Top leaders and leaders of leaders should ensure ongoing dialogue on operational results for citizens and enhance leadership and management aimed at operations and professional competences.
- Leaders of professionals should, in dialogue with employees, perform evidence-based professional leadership and management.
- Direct leaders of employees should strengthen their leadership capacity based on local, relevant, quantitative and qualitative data on the effect of their core task.
- Top leaders and leaders of leaders should avoid micro-management, e.g. through documentation requirements and process requirements, in order to strengthen the leadership discretion. Focus should be on results.

Through our dialogue with public managers, employees, researchers and staff associations, we have often come across a feeling of distance between the administration on the one side and the direct leaders of the employees and employees with professional expertise on the other. This gap also manifests itself in the public debate about the negative sides of New Public Management, or the debate about resources being spent on “cold hands” (bureaucrats) versus “warm hands” (social workers, etc.).

It is a two-way challenge. Leaders of leaders (who are often part of the central administration) do not feel that they are responsible for managing operations - and when they try, they are not given credit for it. On the other hand, public managers with professional expertise push aside the administration because they feel no appreciation of their practice from the administration. Neither of these approaches leads to good public leadership and management.

Leaders of leaders need to be closer to the operational activities and to the institutions and people that they are managing. Part of the solution is to acquire more knowledge about what citizens experience and want from their interactions with the public sector. The opportunities to obtain data that may promote dialogue between different hierarchical levels have never been better, but they are not being exploited to any considerable degree. This surprises us.



Public managers at all levels should have focus on collecting and using feedback from individual citizens or businesses and other relevant user groups, and should use this feedback as a foundation for enhancing the dialogue on operations and operational development.

Input

Only 60% of public managers make decisions based on information on user satisfaction, and only 51% of public managers make decisions based on information about results and effects.

The Danish Leadership and Management Commission's questionnaire survey. Available (in Danish) at www.ledelseskom.dk.



Leaders at all levels should set the course

— The Danish Leadership and Management Commission recommends

- All public managers should above all have a strong leadership identity. The leadership identity may be combined with a professional identity, but leadership is most important.
- Stronger emphasis should be placed on the role and responsibility of public managers. One way to achieve this is for the social partners to enter into new agreements on the salary and employment conditions of public managers.
- All public managers should be able to set a meaningful course by formulating a clear vision for their organisation. If you are not able and willing to do this, you should not have a leadership role.
- Communicating and cementing the values of the organisation is one of the most important tasks for a public manager. Specific work on values must be a focal point in motivating employees and in engaging in dialogue with one's own leader.
- Public managers should be visible internally as well as externally. Internally for employees by being attentive and present. Externally for citizens and stakeholders by being accessible and outreaching.

- Public managers should have contact with what they are managing. Often, the span of control is far too wide and needs to be reduced by increasing the number of public managers or by rethinking the organisation.

Most public managers state that they have a strong leadership identity, and this is positive. We know through research and from practical experience that public managers with a strong leadership identity are better at setting the course and creating results through, and with, others. Unfortunately, however, in some professional areas, public managers have a weaker leadership identity. This is because strong professional competences are considered more important than the leadership identity.

Even the best public managers, with strong leader identities, may go wrong sometimes. At present, some public managers have immediate responsibility for more than 100 employees. That is too many. You cannot successfully manage people with whom you have no contact. Dialogue, recognition and communication of visions require that public managers actually talk with their employees. This does not necessarily mean that public managers have to be physically present at the workplace all the time, but it does mean that they should give priority to being attentive to their employees.

Input

23% of employees state that their immediate leader "rarely" or "never" translates objectives into specific tasks.

The National Research Centre for the Working Environment (2017). Memo to the Danish Leadership and Management Commission.

Some public managers have immediate responsibility for more than 100 employees. One in four of all public managers, corresponding to more than 10,000 public managers, are immediate leaders of more than 27 employees.

The Danish Leadership and Management Commission's questionnaire survey. Available (in Danish) at www.ledeleseskom.dk

Leaders at all levels should set up the team

— The Danish Leadership and Management Commission recommends

- Politicians should employ top leaders, who will then be responsible for setting up their own team.
- The recruitment procedure should be professional and through small recruitment committees.
- Public managers and employees who are not able to perform satisfactorily should be dismissed.

One of the public manager's primary tasks is to set the right team. This is a key tool for developing an organisation. When taking a new direction, there will usually be a need for new competences. This requires that public managers at different levels are able to set up their own team.

Politicians should take part in recruiting top leaders, but political interference in appointments below the very highest level is bad practice. The key reason for this is that leadership discretion is reduced quite considerably if public managers are unable to set up their own team.

Discussions about recruitment of new public managers should take place in a confidential setting. This can be a challenge when many people are involved. This is one of the reasons why we see a potential for improving the recruitment process. Recruitment committees should be small, and stakeholder interests should have no place in the committees because the public manager is responsible for setting up the team - and changing it if necessary.

Absence of initiatives from the relevant leaders of leaders if a public manager is not performing well can easily result in poor well-being, high absenteeism due to sickness and high staff turnover. Ultimately, these factors will have a negative impact on task performance. Therefore, public managers should break away from the practice of waiting too long before taking action with regard to public managers and employees who do not do their job satisfactorily.

Input

Only 21% of public managers state that they agree or strongly agree that their organisation has a practice for dismissing public managers who do not perform.

The Danish Leadership and Management Commission's questionnaire survey. Find more information (in Danish) at www.ledelseskom.dk.

Leaders at all levels should develop their competences

— The Danish Leadership and Management Commission recommends

- An in-depth analysis should be conducted of the content, methods and learning outcomes of formal public leadership training.
- Formal leadership training programmes should strengthen the development of public managers' personal practice and train their abilities to intervene and take action - also when this is difficult.
- All leadership development should be based on specific organisational goals and combine knowledge, reflection and action. Leadership development should not be offered as part of the compensation package.
- Leaders of leaders should make a special effort to develop the leadership identity in upcoming and new public managers.
- Public managers should make it clear how, based on the organisation's leadership principles, they perform good leadership and management themselves, how they translate the organisation's strategy, and which personal values their leadership is based on.

led to a higher degree of professionalisation of public managers. However, several evaluations suggest that some of the training programmes are not sufficiently effective. There may be a long way from the books studied during a training programme to the real world at the workplace. Therefore, the workplaces, and not least leaders of leaders, should play a more active role before, during and after the training programme. They should define goals, allow space for training, follow up and provide feedback.

New public managers are often good at acknowledging employees, but they lack the strong leadership identity required to set the course and to show the courage to delegate tasks and responsibilities to their employees. Leadership identity typically comes with experience. Therefore, there should be special focus on developing new public managers in order to prepare them for their job as quickly as possible. Education and training are part of the solution, but just as importantly, experienced public managers should invite new public managers into their community and serve as good mentors.

Leadership development is a lifelong process. Systematic management and leadership evaluations, ongoing dialogue and feedback are part of the answer. Furthermore, we encourage all public managers to formulate and develop their own personal leadership foundation. When it becomes manifest, the leadership foundation will have a more prominent place in the public manager's own work, thus enabling employees and public managers to contribute to the continued development of the public manager.

The quality reform from 2007 has contributed to strong focus on leadership training, and this has

Postscript

The Danish Leadership and Management Commission has been in contact with up to 10,000 public managers. We have been inspired by the public managers, and our hope is that leaders at all levels, including politicians and the public managers themselves, will draw inspiration from our recommendations and reports. All materials can be downloaded at www.ledelseskom.dk.

One of the aspects of which we have particularly become aware during our work, and which has been confirmed by the questionnaire surveys and at numerous meetings, is that chains of command 'collapse'. This applies both up and down in the hierarchical systems and across professional expertise and authorities.

Therefore, there is a need to strengthen the links in the chains of command, improving the collaboration between public managers and employees at all levels. We propose several important areas where we believe improvements are possible and necessary. First of all, there should be an even stronger focus on creating value for citizens and society. Furthermore, public managers should focus more on operations and on developing operations. This applies in particular to public managers who are not very close to operations, but who have overall managerial and leadership responsibility.

Changes will come from several sources. The public managers should become more active leaders, but there is also a need to change the framework conditions of public managers. More flexible and inclusive structures should be developed for managers to operate in - with regard to governance models, cooperation structure, collective agreements, regulations and political action.

Change will occur when high ambitions meet commitment and a drive for action. Leadership

and management are about generating results through, and with, others. Leadership makes a difference, and good management is crucial for the quality of the welfare experienced by Danish citizens.

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