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Reimagining the future public service workforce

Helen Dickinson, Catherine Needham, Catherine Mangan and Helen Sullivan (Eds.) (Singapore: Springer; 2019; ISBN: 978-9-811314-79-7; 140 pp: €58)

The case for reform has dominated commentaries on public administration for the last decade or so. It is argued that public institutions are not evolving at a pace to meet the broader context of globalisation, digitisation, changing demographics, perma-austerity, increased citizen expectations and decreased citizen trust. Less attention has been paid to the implications that necessary reform would have on the public service workforce, and less still on how public services should develop this workforce. This is the argument set out in the introduction to *Reimagining the Future Public Service Workforce*, an ambitious collection of research evidence and case studies that aims to plug this gap in the literature.

Part One (the introductory chapter) sets the scene and draws on recent research from the UK and Australia which lays the groundwork for the contributions that follow. Part Two (Chapters Two through Seven) cover major themes in reimagining the public service workforce. Part Three moves to how we can develop this workforce (Chapters Eight and Nine), and the editors conclude with cross-cutting themes and challenges in the final chapter.

Part Two begins with a discussion on the role of boundaries and boundary-spanning activities (Buick et al., Chapter Two), which will play an even more imperative role in the future public service. A boundary spanner's primary role is to broker relationships across divides, be they organisational, national, or between disciplines or cultures. The authors highlight the necessary interpersonal, cognitive, managerial, political and entrepreneurial skills needed to conduct this challenging activity, and discuss how these skills can be fostered

and supported through organisational culture, leadership and human resource practices.

Emotional labour and public service work is the topic of Chapter Three, written by Mastracchi and Sawbridge. Emotional labour (regulating emotions when faced with challenging, demanding or stressful work situations) has obvious implications for health and well-being yet, as the authors note, it is often not seriously considered in the workplace and the subject has received little research attention. Mastracchi and Sawbridge draw learning from eight interventions and supports in healthcare services which have been associated with positive outcomes, such as reduced stress and anxiety, increased compassion and job satisfaction. They conclude that the future public service workforce requires more support to enhance self-awareness and empathy and meet the demands of emotional labour.

Lawrence-Pietroni and Needham discuss the power of narratives and storytelling in Chapter Four. Narrative is a specific form of communication, distinct in how it is ordered, compelling, appealing to values and emotions, and purposive in that it promotes action. Narrative has received attention in the public management and leadership literature as a powerful tool that can build connection and purpose. The authors draw on two examples to highlight how storytelling can be used to add purpose to our own work, and to inspire and lead others. The role of storyteller is crucial for the twenty-first century public service leader but, if used inappropriately, can blur boundaries and be manipulative. The authors caution that it must be used ethically.

In Chapter Five, Stewart-Weeks and Campbell explore the influence of design thinking and practice in public services and the implications this has for future skills and culture in the workforce. The authors illustrate the benefits of a design-thinking approach, which cultivates creativity and innovation and supports coproduction by using a user-centered approach to problem-solving. Design subverts traditional procurement processes (research, design, testing, procurement, rollout) by involving citizens who will be directly affected by a new service or policy in the earliest stages of design. Design methods begin with the premise that 'people are experts in their own lives', hence the importance of putting the citizen's personal experience at the centre of decision-making. Like many of the contributions in this book, empathy and collaboration are highlighted as key skills for the public servant of the future. Drawing on case studies of design thinking in the public service, Stewart-Weeks and

Campbell predict that demand for design skills in the public sector will rise, and discuss the workforce implications of such a shift. The authors acknowledge that design thinking may be perceived as risk and that there will be political, institutional and cultural barriers to what can be achieved.

The current public service environment can be described as VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous). In Chapter Six, titled 'More Rave than Waltz – Why the Complexity of Public Service Means the End for Hero Leadership', Managan and Lawrence-Pietroni argue that the traditional concept of a 'hero' leader is no longer appropriate (if it ever was) to the VUCA world. The dance metaphor comes from the notion that the waltz represents hero leadership (clear steps and a dominant leader) whereas twenty-first century leadership is akin to a rave: there are no fixed steps or partners, but dancers work together and respond to shifts in tempo and mood. According to the authors, the shift required in leadership skills is 'profound'. Managan and Lawrence-Pietroni define what this leadership will look like, drawing on concepts explored in earlier chapters such as boundary spanning, storytelling, collaboration and the reality of emotional labour. They then draw on complex adaptive systems theory, the concepts of horizontal versus vertical learning, and recent examples from the UK to outline key ways to nurture skills that will prepare twenty-first century leaders for the VUCA world.

Quirk's contribution in Chapter Seven expands on the principles of empathy, ethics and efficiency as three core capabilities for public sector leaders/managers over the next thirty years and beyond. Quirk contextualises empathy, ethics and efficiency as 'ancient civic virtues that urgently need to be re-imagined for the twenty first century' (p. 93) to meet the present trends and future challenges in public services and respond to emerging social problems and citizen needs. Quirk defines what these three capabilities look like and how they can be developed and supported in public service organisations, cautioning that while they are useful abstract principles they also need to be situated in the practical problems that public leaders face. These chapters combined (Part Two) make a strong case that a new set of skills and competencies is required in the current/future public sector landscape (VUCA).

Part Three considers what is lacking in the literature: how we can develop skills and the implications for recruitment processes. In Chapter Eight, Blackman et al. employ a social learning theory approach to the topic of developing and recruiting the future public

servant. The authors argue that focusing on how adults learn, rather than what is learnt, may enable a change in human resource management to support the development of the capabilities set out in the previous chapters. Blackman et al. use the four processes outlined in Bandura's social learning theory (attentional, retention, motor-reproduction and motivational) to develop a framework that can guide the necessary human resource practices and organisational change. It is envisioned that role models, peer learning, constructive feedback, reflective practice and performance management will play an important role for organisations developing and recruiting the future public servant.

Creating and retaining a diverse workforce continues to be a challenge for public service organisations, despite the attention it has received in recent years and the clear demand for public services to be representative of the communities that they serve. In Chapter Nine, Trehan and Glover critically review the key ideas and controversies in relation to workforce diversity. The authors highlight the clear theoretical need for creating a diverse workforce, but note that empirical evidence is still in its infancy. They explore both the opportunities and the challenges of recruiting and retaining diverse workforces, and pay particular attention to the kind of leadership required and practical ways to implement workforce diversity initiatives.

In the editor's conclusion (Chapter Ten), Dickinson et al. summarise the key lessons of the book and identify cross-cutting themes associated with the future public service workforce. They also emphasise the challenges ahead regarding the scope of changes needed and the impact this will have. Careful workforce planning is paramount as tensions between traditional and new ways of working and thinking arise. Investment in staff recruitment, training and retention should be prioritised, but we must consider the implications for job security and the rights of existing employees.

The editors also consider the broader political climate and the need for politicians and decision-makers who are creative and innovative and embrace risk. They reiterate the contextual challenges set out in the introduction and the cross-cutting themes throughout the book, highlighting the VUCA context of public service work, which challenges New Public Management and traditional bureaucratic structures. They highlight the sustained importance of leadership (albeit a radically different style), the role of learning (from focusing on vertical development to using a social learning approach), and the

importance of ethics and empathy, and of taking a holistic approach in recognising the public service worker as a 'whole person'.

This book is a timely and bold collection and makes a compelling case for a new public service workforce. It is an accessible read, intended for a broad audience of current and future public servants, HR managers and academics. I would further recommend that this book could, and indeed should, be read and discussed among policymakers and policy entrepreneurs, and should be required reading on professional degree programmes.

However, much of the book is still theoretical. Although it sets the groundwork, further research is needed. The authors do not propose a research agenda or explicitly note the implications for future research – but this should be considered; particularly how to develop new skills and the practical application of practice in HR and management.

Throughout its ten chapters, this book highlights the rapidly changing external environment and VUCA context of public services that deem traditional bureaucratic tools as no longer fit for purpose. It manages a hopeful tone of the need for innovation while also rightly emphasising the human element – empathy and support for citizens (i.e. design thinking and co-production) and the public sector workforce (i.e. recognising emotional labour and the need for supports). Many chapters touch on collaboration with citizens and even artificial intelligence, yet little attention is paid to the implications for accountability, ethics and data protection needed to forward this position.

On the whole, *Reimagining the Future Public Service Workforce* deserves praise for its bold undertaking, and I hope to see future editions of the book and new volumes that build on its foundation.

Ellen Garvey