

## **Learning to lead with political astuteness**

Sophie Yates<sup>a\*</sup> and Jean Hartley<sup>b</sup>

*<sup>a</sup>Public Service Research Group, School of Business, UNSW Canberra, Canberra, Australia; <sup>b</sup>The Open University Business School, The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK*

\*PO Box 7916

Canberra BC 2610

Australia

[s.yates@unsw.edu.au](mailto:s.yates@unsw.edu.au)

Twitter: @DrSophieYates

Dr Sophie Yates is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Public Service Research Group, UNSW Canberra. She has published on political astuteness, co-production of public services, and disability and domestic violence policy. She is interested in a gender lens on public administration and public policy.

Professor Jean Hartley is Professor of Public Leadership at the Open University Business School. She has contributed to the field of public leadership and management for two decades through research, teaching and development work. Her special interests are in leadership with political astuteness, and innovation and organizational change in public services.

## **Learning to lead with political astuteness**

There is increasing recognition that leaders exercising political astuteness are more effective at work. Understanding how political astuteness skills are acquired is valuable in all sectors and is particularly important in the case of public sector managers, for whom formal and informal politics is an integral part of their context. This paper addresses the theory and empirical research gap on leadership development for political skills, by reporting on a mixed methods study of mainly senior managers from the UK, Australia and New Zealand, with a survey of 1012 and 42 interviews. We find that the sources of political astuteness development perceived as most valuable tended to be unplanned and experiential more than formal, and the paper deploys a political skills acquisition framework to explore and explain these findings.

Keywords: political astuteness, leadership development, political skill, public sector leadership, experiential learning

### **Introduction**

There is increasing recognition that leaders with political astuteness (the ability to work with diverse and sometimes competing interests) are likely to be more effective at work (Kimura 2015; Doldor 2017; Ferris et al. 2019), particularly at more senior levels (Gandz and Murray 1980). However, to date there has been little empirical research about how political capabilities (or skills in shorthand) are acquired or the value that leaders place on different means of acquiring or enhancing such skills. Furthermore, Doldor (2017) notes a lack of methodological diversity in the few studies that exist, commenting that most organisational politics research is

quantitative and positivist, using methods that are not suitable for investigating the development of political skill over time (e.g. cross-sectional studies). Understanding how political skills are acquired or enhanced is valuable in any sector (Buchanan 2008), but is particularly important in the case of public sector managers, who must detect and manage politically sensitive issues deriving from public policy, formal politics and partnership working across boundaries, as well as the informal politics within their own organisations and across networks and partnerships (Ferlie et al. 2003; Hartley et al. 2015; Alford et al. 2017).

In this paper we address these questions by reporting on a mixed methods study investigating the ways that public sector leaders and managers develop their own political skills. We combine quantitative and qualitative data, including a survey of 1012 middle, senior and very senior managers from the UK, Australia and New Zealand, and semi-structured interviews with 42 of them. This enabled us to probe their thoughts and recollections about what influences were most and least helpful for developing their political astuteness skills.

Politics has been in a strand in organization theory for many decades (Mintzberg 1983; Hartley *et al.* 2019), with varied views as to whether it is a destructive or constructive force within and across organizations. The last two decades have seen a return to the acceptance of the existence – and even in some contexts the value – of politics in the workplace. The impact of politics (both formal and informal) may vary according to the sector the organisation is in, the degree to which it has a high and visible public profile, the sensitivity of some of its activities, and its accountability and governance structures. However, all organisations must take

account of politics (Silvester and Wyatt 2018), and public managers in particular must be sensitive to the interplay of politics with organizational purpose (Alford et al. 2017). Value can be added where political astuteness enables social or organizational outcomes to be achieved, not solely personal gain or manipulation (Alford et al. 2017). Destructive aspects of political astuteness (manipulation and deviousness for personal ends) are also possible (Buchanan 2008).

Understanding and working with diverse and sometimes competing interests within and across organizations and networks is recognized to be an increasingly valuable skill set for leadership (Crosby and Bryson 2018). Leadership is increasingly exercised not only within organizational settings, but in partnerships and coalitions where leadership may need to be exercised beyond authority and where influence and persuasion are key processes of leadership. Political astuteness can enable the 'reading' of diverse interests and the ability to construct coalitions and alignment to get things done (Doldor 2017), thereby contributing to leader and organizational performance (Buchanan 2008). It also reduces the personal stress of not understanding the hidden agendas in organizations (Perrewé et al. 2000). Some argue that political astuteness can be acquired (Ferris et al. 2002; Silvester and Wyatt 2018; Doldor 2017) but there is a paucity of information about how this happens.

This paper examines three research questions about how political astuteness is acquired or enhanced among leaders and managers in public services. First, which political astuteness developmental events, activities and experiences have most frequently been encountered? Second, which of these are most highly valued by leaders and managers? Finally, are differences in managerial level or other

demographic factors associated with differences in self-reported political astuteness skills? The research questions are intellectually embedded within two literatures, one about leadership development and one about the acquisition and maturation of political skills.

This paper makes several contributions to the literature. First, it adds to the sparse literature on the development of political skills and increases the methodological diversity of the existing literature by comprising the first mixed methods study on this topic. This is an addition to the generic leadership development literature while also speaking to the narrower field of the political skills of leadership. Second, it specifically addresses the gap in theory and research about the development of political skills by public leaders and managers, for whom navigating both big P (formal politics, political institutions and working with the public) and small p politics is an integral part of their jobs, their roles and their institutions – particularly at more senior levels, which is where this study is focused. Finally, it introduces and draws on a framework of political skill acquisition which helps to make sense of the data and which may be valuable for further research.

### **Literature on political astuteness development**

This section examines the literature pertinent to understanding the development of leadership with political astuteness. First, we examine how politics and political astuteness is conceptualized and defined, as this ontology will influence how the literature is assessed. We then cover skills development, focusing first on the wider context of leadership development and then narrowing to review previous research on the development of political astuteness.

### ***Politics and political astuteness***

There is increasing recognition that politics is prevalent in and around organizations (Ammeter et al. 2002) and that effectiveness at work requires political savvy (Thiel et al. 2014; Kapoutsis et al. 2017), particularly for organizational leaders (Rouleau and Balogun 2011). While there are varied definitions of politics in organization studies (Hartley 2020; Buchanan 2008), here we take politics to cover both the formal political actors, institutions and processes of government as well as informal or ‘small p’ politics, sometimes also called organizational politics (Waring et al. 2018). This paper is therefore about both ‘big P’ and ‘small p’ politics. Siegel (2020) defines politics as “the positive way of ensuring that all competing views are taken into account in making complex decisions involving many stakeholders” (p. 5). A number of writers (e.g. Buchanan 2008; Silvester and Wyatt 2018; Provis 2006; Alford et al. 2017) note that commentaries and empirical research studies on politics in organisations can be conceptualized as those viewing politics as ‘bad’; those that regard it as a neutral or ‘good’ characteristic of organizational life; and those arguing that it may be either, according to context and attribution of motive. Increasingly there is recognition of another positioning: that organizational politics are a fact of life (Butcher and Clarke 2003; Ferris et al. 2005; 2019; McAllister et al. 2015) and that political astuteness can be valuable in achieving organizational as well as personal goals (e.g. Baddeley and James 1987; Ammeter et al. 2002; Smith et al. 2009). These writings have helped to elucidate aspects of political skill (taking skill to be a broad word to cover behaviours, judgements and capabilities). There is not yet a settled language about the skills of handling politics in the workplace and so we provide some similar terms from the literature in Table 1.

[Table 1 about here]

This paper deploys the concept of political astuteness, which is becoming increasingly the preferred language in this field (e.g. Ayres 2019; Waring et al. 2018). The perspective we take is that leading with political astuteness relates to leadership skills necessary for working effectively with stakeholders within and across organisations, and across diverse and competing interests. There is a growing literature concerned with the political skills of leadership and management (Waring et al. 2018; Alford et al. 2017; Hartley et al. 2015; Buchanan 2008; Mainiero 1994). Leadership across partnerships, networks and coalitions involves taking account of divergent interests, values, goals and processes, and this calls for political astuteness (Crosby and Bryson 2018).

We argue, on the basis of the literature and our empirical research, that political astuteness is a crucial skill across all sectors (Hartley and Fletcher 2008; Buchanan, 2008) but that it is particularly crucial for public leaders and managers, for several reasons (Hartley et al. 2013). First, public sector organisations are subject to the authority or control of governments, which by definition are political. This imposes a double complexity on public servants. On the one hand, it means that they are more likely than private sector managers to be involved with formal and informal politics, finding themselves interacting with political overseers and enmeshed in processes involving value-judgments, contending stakeholders and political manoeuvring. But at the same time, public servants are not supposed to become too closely involved in formal politics. They are expected to exercise ‘neutral

competence', faithfully serving elected representatives and their institutions in the execution of policies and the provision of advice, without exhibiting any bias towards any political party or interest group. Political astuteness is a necessary skill for negotiating the tensions between these two expectations of the role (Hartley et al. 2013; Siegel 2020).

In addition, public managers have to work not only with elected politicians but also a range of other actors and groups. They may have to work with other government organisations, with civil society organisations and with movements that advocate or lobby on behalf of consumer, pressure and political groups. They may have to face the media to explain particular policies, events or incidents. They may therefore be working with a range of stakeholders where their legitimacy rests less on the exercise of their formal authority and more on persuasion and influence. This requires political and not just technical skills.

The focus in this paper is on middle and senior leaders and managers working in organizational settings (in this context, government and public services). Leadership can be defined as “mobilising individuals, organisations and networks to formulate and/or enact purposes, values and actions which aim or claim to create valued outcomes” (Hartley 2018, p. 203). While there are many contexts and many processes which indicate leadership (Grint 2005; 't Hart 2014; Crosby and Bryson 2018), here the focus is on organizational leadership, which combines both hierarchical authority and leadership influence. Many scholars would argue that senior managers, to be effective, need to exert leadership given that they tend to have to deal with complex and ambiguous challenges where there are diverse stakeholders, values

and goals in play. In organizational terms, there is a strong overlap between leadership and management. It is known that the opportunities, requirements and deployment of political skills increases the further up an organizational hierarchy a person is (Rouleau and Balogun 2011; Gandz and Murray 1980). The more senior a manager is, the more likely they are to believe political skills are important and deploy them (e.g. Madison et al. 1980; Doldor 2017).

### ***Leadership development***

Scholars have sometimes tried to pinpoint what exactly it is that develops as a result of leadership development initiatives. The framework of political astuteness capabilities we use in this paper (see Table 2 below) can be termed a leadership competency model – a bundle of leadership-related knowledge, skills, and abilities that helps focus individuals and organisations in developing leadership skills (Day and Thornton 2018). A skills-based approach is consistent with the idea that individuals' leadership capabilities can be developed, and also provides a bridge between trait theories and behavioural theories of leadership (Day and Thornton 2018).

Day and Thornton (2018) note three main approaches to developing leadership. First, structured programs, which can be divided into individual skill development, socialisation into organisations, strategic leadership to foster large-scale change, and action learning initiatives. But as Day et al. (2014) argue, much leadership development actually occurs in the 'white spaces' between formal leadership development events, and in fact ongoing practice through day-to-day leadership activities is thought to be the crux of leadership development. The second approach to leadership development is through on-the-job experiences such as job

transitions, obstacles, and challenges (Day and Thornton 2018). These may be unintended or part of a formally planned program, for example through enrolling a manager on special projects or committees (Boak and Crabbe 2018). Respondents to Boak and Crabbe's (2018) survey on experiential methods of leadership development indicated that challenging experiences such as making mistakes were considered important for developing leadership capabilities, while controlled interventions such as formal feedback and coaching/mentoring were less useful. Time for reflection was considered useful for helping with this learning. A third approach to leadership development is Deliberately Developmental Organizations, a newer addition to the literature that prioritizes simultaneously developing people and organisations by embedding developmental practices in the culture of organisations (Day and Thornton 2018).

One leadership development framework of interest in this paper derives from a different context – developing leadership in elected politicians. The skills politicians draw on may be relevant to public leaders and managers (within democratic and ethical constraints; see Alford et al. (2017)). Silvester and Wyatt (2018) also blend insights from political skills for politicians and managers. Hartley (2011), drawing on the leadership development literature, considers two dimensions of development. The first dimension is about whether the development activity relates to action or reflection. The second dimension is the extent to which leadership development is planned or emergent. Planned means that it is possible to define the inputs (e.g. skills, competencies, traits etc) or the outputs (e.g. standards, performance) required for leadership (and therefore leadership development) in particular organisational settings. By contrast, emergent approaches to leadership and leadership development

see leadership as a dynamic process involving a set of interactions among leaders, stakeholders, context etc, and therefore leadership has emergent properties (which cannot be predicted in advance). Hartley (2011) proposes that this results in four quadrants of leadership development, as shown in in Figure 1.

[Figure 1 about here]

Turning to the development of political astuteness, the literature is sparse about where and how such skills are learnt and what the implications are for more effective development strategies in the future, particularly for public leaders and managers. A growing strand of organisational politics research investigates the political skills of employees, their antecedents, and their relationship to career success across the workforce more generally (e.g. Ferris et al. 2005; 2008; Brouer et al. 2013; Oerder et al. 2014; McAllister et al. 2015), but there is less comment on how such skills are developed. This work is largely based on the Ferris et al. (2005) 18-item Political Skill Inventory, which deploys a different conceptualisation of political skill from the current study. The Political Skill Inventory comprises four dimensions: interpersonal influence skills; social astuteness; networking ability; and apparent sincerity (Ferris et al., 2008). It takes a narrower perspective than we do on what it means to operate with political skill, being largely based on personality traits and interpersonally oriented constructs such as self-monitoring and emotional intelligence, as they themselves note (Ferris et al. 2005), and not including factors such as conflict management, stakeholder management or strategic thinking. This also means that most empirical work to date on the development of managerial political skills employs a framework that does not adequately capture the often outward-facing

requirements, public purpose and interdependence of the public service workforce. Importantly, the Ferris measure is about the political skill of employees regardless of hierarchical position whereas the current study focuses very specifically on organizational leaders and managers with substantial seniority.

Silvester and Wyatt (2018) note that few studies have investigated the processes through which people develop political skills. They report that political skill training, employee socialisation and mentoring have been identified as the methods most likely to aid this development (which is somewhat at odds with the generic leadership development literature). Most of the limited research has focused on informal socialisation processes and interpersonal relationships, particularly employees' relationships with leaders. Mentors assist mentees by imparting knowledge about 'how things work around here' and the informal rules of the game – thus helping them learn about the power dynamics of the organisation or partnership, formal and informal relationships between groups, and hidden social norms that guide behaviour. Limited evidence also supports the notion that learning about the wider political context has a positive impact on the acquisition of political skill (Silvester and Wyatt 2018). Kimura's (2015) review also notes that political skill appears to be developmental as well as predicted by personal disposition, and that development of political skill in the early career stage has a positive impact on later career success.

Early qualitative work on political skill development came from Mainiero (1994), who conceived of leaders as going through a political maturation process that she described as 'political seasoning'. She interviewed 55 senior executive women to determine the role that corporate politics played in shaping their careers. Consistent

with the darker view of politics as illegitimate and self-serving, most of the women claimed that their political skills had nothing to do with their success, and that in fact they preferred not to play ‘political games’, and to be known instead for their hard work. However, Mainiero (1994) concluded through careful analysis of their work histories that these women had a sensitivity to corporate politics and had acquired considerable political skills through a ‘seasoning’ or ‘maturation’ process comprising four stages. Similarly, Doldor (2017), in her interview-based study of 38 junior to senior leaders in the private sector, also theorized a stage-based view of political maturation. Participants began in a place of ‘naivete and discovery’, progressed through ‘coping and endurance’, and ended in a place of ‘leveraging and proficiency’. But unlike Mainiero (1994), Doldor found that while initially suspicious of organisational politics and political behaviour, by the time her participants reached the final stage of maturation they had begun to see politics as functional and ethical, able to serve both positive and negative purposes, and contributing to positive organisational outcomes.

Both Doldor (2017) and Mainiero (1994) noted that mentoring and other types of relational learning were important to their participants, with 40% of Mainiero’s participants reporting that they in turn mentored other women. Another important developmental experience in both studies was the occurrence of political ‘incidents’ or ‘blunders’ early in participants’ careers, which alerted them to the existence of political factors of which they had previously been unaware, and triggered reflection and subsequent learning. However, a focus on managers’ progression through developmental stages, rather than on *methods* of development, means that key

questions remain about the range and value of different methods or experiences through which managers developed political skills, and how this development occurs.

Ferris et al. (2002) detailed a series of influences that previous literature suggested might assist with the development of political skills. They argued that political skill involves competencies that “defy conventional classroom training and education”, and thus active, experiential, process-oriented techniques will be more useful for this purpose (Ferris et al. 2002:10). They saw executive coaching as particularly suited to developing and putting together the four dimensions of their political skill framework. Other potentially useful methods included drama-based training, assessing oneself using personality inventories, videotaped roleplaying with feedback, critique/feedback sessions, counselling, leadership training, behavioural modelling, mentoring, and developmental simulations (Ferris et al. 2002).

Quantitative empirical research on the development of political skills has largely drawn on the Political Skill Inventory (Ferris et al. 2005), consisting of the four dimensions outlined above. Ferris et al. (2008) tested the relationship between mentoring and political skill, asking whether receiving mentoring was related to political skill levels, measured longitudinally (data collected twice, two years apart). They found that mentoring was positively related to self-reported political skill in their sample of 337 German business graduates. Chopin et al. (2012) likewise found that participants with mentors reported higher levels of political skill than those without. Interestingly, they also asked their participants about the quality of the mentoring relationship and found that those who had received higher-quality mentoring did not report higher levels of political skill. In other words, it mattered

*whether* participants had a mentor, but the quality of the relationship was not correlated with political skill. Chopin et al. (2012) speculated that the mentoring itself may not confer a benefit: the type of people who proactively seek out or are singled out to receive mentoring may already have higher levels of political skill.

Also relying on the Political Skill Inventory, Oerder et al. (2014) investigated employees' development of political skill through their own means, rather than through training or mentoring. In a study of 150 works councillors<sup>1</sup> in Germany, participants' self-reported political skill was higher with greater seniority and length of service. The explanation was that individuals in higher hierarchical positions had more opportunities to develop political skill, because of the higher-stakes tasks and responsibilities associated with higher positions. Further, older councillors were found to develop political skill (specifically networking ability) at a higher rate than middle-aged councillors. Oerder et al. (2014) argued that this evidence supported developmental views of political skill.

In summary, the empirical literature is sparse, and there is even less about public managers, who by design have to work in formally political environments. This leads to the formulation of the research questions:

1. Which political astuteness developmental events, activities and experiences have most frequently been encountered by leaders and managers?
2. Which of these are most highly valued by leaders and managers?
3. Are differences in managerial level or other demographic factors associated with differences in self-reported political astuteness skills?

---

<sup>1</sup> Works councils are union-like organizations representing workers at the local level. Works councillors are elected by the workforce.

We turn now to our empirical research into how political astuteness skills have been acquired and enhanced amongst a large group of public sector leaders and managers.

### **Research design and methods**

This is a mixed methods study drawing on survey data (both quantitative and open-ended) and depth interviews, allowing triangulation of findings (Flick 2018).

Research participants came from three countries: Australia, New Zealand and the UK.

The paper analyses data from the three countries in aggregate; it is *not* a comparative study because the aim is to understand the development of political astuteness skills in general. However, we noted similar patterns in all three countries, justifying the aggregated approach and strengthening the generalisability of the research. The survey preceded the interviews, enabling interviews to explore in considerable depth some of the findings from the survey. Ethics approval was received through the Australia and New Zealand School of Government Human Research Ethics Committee.

### ***Survey design***

Survey items focused on both formal and informal politics in the respondents' workplaces. The survey was designed to elicit responses about what public managers understood by politics in their work as a manager; the contexts in which they used political skills; their rating of their own skills and, separately, their ratings of fellow senior managers; and how they had acquired or enhanced their own political astuteness. The survey items have been used in other studies (e.g. Hartley et al. 2015;

Alford et al. 2017). Only data relevant to the development aspects of political astuteness are reported here.

Our conceptual framework of the capabilities (skills) of political astuteness has five dimensions, as sketched in Table 2. These are: Personal Skills; Interpersonal Skills; Reading People and Situations; Building Alignment and Alliances; and Strategic Direction and Scanning. Together, these form a meta-competency (Briscoe and Hall 1999) in that the exercise of such skills effectively requires competence in each dimension, though certain dimensions may be more salient for certain activities. The framework was developed by two organisational psychologists for a UK study which was subsequently extended to Australia and New Zealand. The political astuteness framework and potential skill development sources were derived from a literature review on leadership development; three exploratory focus groups with 41 managers held in London, Birmingham and Cardiff; two meetings of the Steering Group for the UK phase of the study; and analysis of relevant items from the Warwick Political Leadership Questionnaire. The survey was refined through piloting at a UK management conference, and the 50 skill items were validated through factor analysis using the phase 1 UK data to ensure they reflected the five dimensions of the framework. For more information on survey development and validation, see Hartley and Fletcher (2008).

[Table 2 about here]

The survey measured political skill by asking participants to rate themselves on a six-point scale (where 1 = weak and 6 = excellent), in order to discourage

respondents from marking the midpoint of the scale. The skills self-rating section comprised 50 items (with 10 items for each of the five political skill dimensions described in Table 2). Participants were also asked to rate the skills of their senior colleagues, to introduce a comparison between self-rating and other-rating. The survey then presented participants with 24 possible sources of political skill development, asking how useful each had been in developing political – and not just managerial – skills on a five-point scale from ‘of no value’ to ‘extremely valuable’. They also had the option of reporting ‘not applicable’ if they had not been exposed to that source. In addition, an open-ended survey question asked participants to expand on sources found to be particularly useful, whether mentioned in the previous list or not. 726 of the 1012 participants added comments. Data were coded in Excel using both the original 24 development sources and emergent themes.

### *Survey sample*

The survey sample consisted of 1,012 managers working at national/federal level in all three countries, as well as at sub-national level: state and territory government for Australia, and local government for the UK. They worked in a wide range of geographical locations across each country, type of public service organization, and type of role. 81% of the participants identified themselves as senior or very senior managers, with the remainder middle managers. While they mainly hold managerial titles and can self-identify as managers, many at this level can be considered organizational leaders in addition, given some overlaps in role (Algahtani 2014). Participants were recruited using central agencies and professional organisations to ensure wide representation of public leaders and managers. The survey was anonymous, though if participants volunteered to be interviewed at the end of the

survey, they were asked to supply contact details. Demographic characteristics are shown in Table 3.

[Table 3 about here]

### ***Interviews***

The 42 interviewees were a selection of volunteers from survey participants, chosen to represent as many of the different governmental levels, public services and employment contexts as possible. Twenty-one were from the UK (of which eight were local government chief executives, three were from devolved governments and the remainder were at the national level); 16 were from Australia (including five of the six state governments), and five from New Zealand. The sample encompassed roles in national, devolved, state and local governments, and central and line agencies as well as a range of public service roles (e.g. policing, environment, human services). The interviews were semi-structured, following up some survey areas in more depth. The questions relating to the development of political skills asked about factors or experiences that most influenced the development of political astuteness and how this occurred, with prompt questions to explore context and reflections. We further examined development by asking some interviewees whether and how they developed political skills in their own staff. This was a different way to access views about what helped to enhance political skills in the workplace, recognising that managers are sometimes able to perceive things for others that they cannot perceive for themselves (Fletcher 2008). All interviews except three were audio-recorded (detailed notes were taken for those). Analysis was by thematic coding using NVivo.

## **Findings**

We now present data relevant to each of the research questions, beginning with an overview of some key data to contextualise the other results.

### ***Overall rating of political astuteness – self and others***

As this study mainly relies on self-report data, it is useful to analyse some information which triangulates the potential bias of self-report. We report here on one important measure which provides a self and other comparison. Participants rated themselves on political astuteness and also rated the members of the senior management team they worked most closely with.

[Figure 2 about here]

Figure 2 shows a modest leniency bias (paired samples t-tests,  $p < 0.05$ ) for four of the five dimensions of political astuteness (the exception being ‘reading people and situations’). The mean difference was largest for ‘personal skills’ and ‘interpersonal skills’. The mean overall self-report rating of political astuteness at 4.16 (on a scale of 1-6) suggests that participants were not seeing themselves through rose-tinted spectacles. This gives some confidence to the self-report data to be presented on development experiences. Furthermore, the survey was anonymous, which can help to reduce self-presentation bias. Finally, the interview transcripts show frank, revealing and reflective discussion in which participants talked about their mistakes and what they had learnt from these as well as their successes, suggesting that they were being open with the interviewers.

### ***Participants' understanding of political astuteness***

To contextualize the other findings, we briefly present data on how our participants understood the concept of politics in their work, which would likely affect their views about developing skills to deal with it in the workplace. Public managers saw the politics in their work in largely constructive terms. This is shown in Table 4, where 'alliance-building to achieve organizational objectives' was most strongly endorsed. Close behind was politics as concerned with the formal processes and institutions of government, followed by 'ways in which different interests are reconciled' and 'scanning factors in the external environment that the organization needs to consider'. With much lower endorsement comes 'people protecting their turf' and 'pursuit of personal advantage', which represent the more negative perspectives noted in the generic management literature. Interview data supported these findings, with participants generally seeing political astuteness as being related to how they could understand the external political environment in support of organisational or ministerial goals; managing complex stakeholder situations; and mobilising resources to get things done.

[Table 4 here]

### ***Frequency of development methods***

Table 5 shows the percentage of participants who reported being exposed to each of the 24 sources of development presented in the survey, with the mean score for each item. This enables consideration of the pervasiveness of each influence or method (RQ 1) and how valuable participants considered it to be (RQ 2).

[Table 5 about here]

Starting with the most-experienced sources, virtually all participants in the survey had been exposed to: gaining experience on the job (99%); learning from their own mistakes (99%); handling crises (98%); good example of a senior manager (98%); and observing role models (98%). These are all experience-based and/or observation-based methods of acquiring political skills. By contrast, large numbers had not been exposed to certain situations or methods that, from focus groups and the literature, may assist with political skills development. These included: professional coaching (53 per cent had not had this); formal mentoring (49 per cent); or attending a learning set (33 per cent) – all of which are common techniques in leadership development (Garvey 2010; Day et al. 2014).

### ***Reported value of development methods***

This section examines how valuable the participants found each method. As shown in Table 4, the methods perceived as most valuable were by and large also those most frequently experienced: gaining experience in the job; learning from mistakes; handling crises; observing good senior managers and other role models. Again, these were more ad hoc, observational and experiential methods. The developmental influences reported to be *least* valuable tended to be more formal, organized and even academic (e.g. professional coaching; reading leadership books; feedback from psychometrics). Formal mentoring, which some of the literature suggests is useful, was rated second to lowest, at 2.03 out of 4. This is not to say that such methods could not be made relevant and valuable for developing political astuteness, but rather that they are not currently being experienced in this way. Another factor to consider is

availability – as one interview participant said, “I’m not aware of any course that is specifically there for the political antennae. That’s something you seem to learn on the job in Australia!”

We found differences in the value of development methods by managerial level, with statistically significant differences on 8 of the 24 methods. These are largely about experiential methods, showing that middle managers rate these methods lower than do senior managers. Middle managers reported gaining lower value from: informal mentoring; gaining experience in the job; handling crises; good example of a senior manager; observing role models; and working with elected politicians. Middle managers also reported less value from feedback from psychometrics. Finally, middle managers reported *more* value from academic study.

### ***Factor analysis of development methods***

We undertook an exploratory factor analysis of the development methods data using principal component analysis, with varimax rotation and Kaiser normalisation. This analysis showed that the sources of development fall into several identifiable factors, shown in Table 6. Most items are found in theoretically logical clusters: study and training; experience and reflection; coaching and mentoring; learning from self and others; and observation. This suggests that experiential methods (particularly job experience and examples of other managers and politicians) seem to be particularly important as a cluster in fostering or enhancing political astuteness skills.

[Table 6 about here]

### ***Demographic correlates of learning political astuteness skills***

The third research question examines whether differences in certain demographics specifically gender, managerial level, and career experiences, were associated with differences in self-reported learning of political astuteness skills. First, we did not find any significant differences between the results of male and female participants.

However, there were differences associated with seniority. Political astuteness skill ratings analysed by managerial level (director, senior manager and middle manager) were different on all five dimensions and for total average score. Middle managers gave lower self-ratings than either senior or very senior managers (Table 7). The mean overall score for very senior managers was 4.33, for senior managers 4.19, and for middle managers 3.89. An ANOVA with post-hoc Bonferroni showed that this finding was statistically significant ( $f = 29.738$ ;  $p < .001$ ). While this is cross-sectional data it does suggest that skills increase with seniority (suggesting that development is happening over time), though it is not possible to tell from this analysis if more senior managers have greater exposure to contexts requiring political astuteness skills (so more opportunity for acquiring these skills), whether they have more confidence in using these skills, or whether those with political astuteness skills are more likely to be promoted.

[Table 7 about here]

The analysis also shows that just under half of participants (43%) had experience of working overseas, and those who had done this reported higher levels of political astuteness on all five dimensions (see Table 8; differences were statistically significant), suggesting that exposure to different cultures might be a developmental

opportunity for enhancing political astuteness skills. We anticipated that having worked in a different sector rather than a single sector might also be associated with higher levels of political astuteness. Working in a different sector is an experience that would also tend to broaden individuals' experiences and thus potentially increase their political skills (Silvester and Wyatt 2018) – however the differences for this independent variable were not statistically significant in this study.

[Table 8 about here]

Overall, these results suggest that political astuteness skills may be learnt through experience, though the data are suggestive not conclusive, given the cross-sectional nature of the research. However, a cross-sectional design can be compensated for through the addition of interview data, which Doldor (2017) notes is more useful for examining how participants experience and link phenomena over time. It is to these data we turn in the next section.

### ***Qualitative analysis***

Here we analyse both interview data (n=42) and data from the open-ended survey question about which methods were particularly valuable for learning political skills (n=726). Many of the themes derived from the quantitative data also emerged from our interviews.

In the interviews, the two most common developmental methods were observation of other managers or politicians, mentioned by nearly half of participants (20), and also gaining experience in the job, mentioned by 19. Interviewees described

observing both good and poor role models and reflecting on what made them effective:

P23 (very senior, NZ): She was incredibly cunning at all of this. Very, very astute, and I remember I would go in with this notion that we could really tackle something head-on, and she would say “oh [name], I think we’ll approach this one crab-wise”, sideways you know. And she often had kind of cunning ways of approaching issues that were difficult.

P40 (very senior, UK): I watch- not always necessarily directly, but I think I sort of absorb good behaviours, good handlings that I see from other people ‘live’.

A number also mentioned learning what not to do from examples of colleagues and managers:

P20 (senior, AU): ...there were some people I’ve worked with that I’d never want to work with again, but they were very good role models in terms of things not to do. And those people can be extremely important because you can see the effect that they have on other people, and you therefore consciously make a decision that you never ever want to exhibit those types of behaviours.

33% of responses to the open-ended survey question on development methods also mentioned observing others, including good or bad examples of managers.

On-the-job learning by interviewees encompassed contexts such as working in politically sensitive or risky areas; the contrasts between progressing from operational work to more strategic roles; moving from line agencies to central agencies or public service roles in political offices; handling crises; learning (sometimes painfully) from mistakes; and working in roles that required participants to influence others over whom they had little authority:

P21 (senior, AU): So I went up there and got parachuted into this really complex difficult job, did it for 12 months, opened my eyes ...it's the interface between the department and the ministerial staff so I felt quite privileged going there.

P30 (very senior, UK): There were points where I did things that I now know were mistakes really, and I was lucky enough not to go under from them. So I do think there is an element of- an awful lot of this is you kind of learn on the job.

Further, nearly 30% of respondents to the open-ended survey question mentioned on-the-job experiences as valuable for developing their political astuteness:

Learning on the job has no peer, you can't read a book to learn this sort of human interaction skill. (AU survey participant)

Interestingly, despite its median positioning in the quantitative data (13th most valuable out of 24 sources), 12 interview participants (out of 42) mentioned working with elected politicians as an important influence on the development of their political astuteness. So did 17% of the participants who filled out the open-ended survey question:

Experience in different positions involving closer liaison with ministerial offices and ministers themselves particularly on very high-profile government objectives. (AU survey participant)

Working with elected Members on a cross party basis and involving daily contact. (UK survey participant)

In short, the main methods of developing political skill were based more on experience rather than formal training or development. And some of these experiences were painful – learning from one's own mistakes and handling crises can be

particularly stretching. As one UK survey participant put it, “Experience is from learning from mistakes but I don't think this is the best way to learn political awareness and it can be very costly!”.

We found little evidence of learning through, for example, careful mentoring or sharing of skills – only eight interview participants mentioned influences such as (mainly informal) mentoring, reflecting with colleagues, or action learning sets. However, the mentoring experiences that did work could be quite powerful:

P13 (senior, AU): When I became a Director I remember [my former manager] saying I think it's too early for you to become a Director, and I said why is it too early when I've been in the business for 30 years? ...what she meant was, too early in my understanding of the political environment that I was going to be operating in. So she said she was going to coach me through it, and she did.

In addition, only 10% of survey participants answering the open-ended question mentioned formal or informal coaching or mentoring relationships as being important for the development of their skills (72 out of 726 responses). Neither did many participants report positive experiences with formal programs of development – in fact, several participants explicitly commented on the lack of formal development in this area: “I can't think of a single instance of any kind of formal training around things like political astuteness” (P08, senior, AU); “funnily enough, when I think about it, we don't get any political training” (P15, senior, UK).

However, 14 interviewees mentioned formal study as having a positive influence on their political skills through broadening their horizons, teaching them

specific skills such as negotiation, or giving them conceptual backing for their real-world practitioner experiences:

P01 (very senior, AU): About 10+ years into my career I went back and did postgrad studies back at [university] and it turned out to be economics, psychology, about how people make decisions, but it involved a whole range of readings around agricultural extension, social psychology, economic theory and sociology and all that sort of stuff, so understanding people. So that gave me a much broader world view than I had as a straight technical scientist.

One participant who had been on a public sector leadership course noted that it expanded her awareness of politics in other contexts:

P21 (senior, AU): [The course] sort of pushed me to a different level where we were talking about the big and small p politics that I was dealing with here in [state], that they were dealing with at federal government level, and then the connections with diplomatic relations... [I realized that] although I think I've got an onion here and I'm very good at peeling back six layers to understand where the kernel is, there's bigger vegetables out there.

More broadly, this theme of expanding one's horizons – whether by secondment, travel, study, or working with other organisations and communities – was prevalent in the dataset:

P07 (senior, AU): ...going around the state and talking directly to communities, and I think that sort of experience as well gives you a pretty good idea that you can't run your own merry race, that there's a whole lot of opposing and different opinions, and just because you think it's a good idea doesn't mean it necessarily is.

P41 (very senior, UK): Moving departments for me was a very big thing, I learnt an enormous amount from doing that. ...different working culture, and interacting with a completely different set of stakeholders, and a different type of policy.

As with Doldor (2017) and Mainiero (1994), our participants reflected that critical political incidents aided their political astuteness development. Fourteen interviewees mentioned lightbulb moments, painful experiences that made them want to learn more and avoid such experiences in future, or moments that expanded their experiences and horizons:

P17 (middle, AU): So usually the situation that makes me want to enhance has been a situation where I've been less successful, where I thought I had a good argument and people weren't really interested, and...getting bounced or being used as a pawn in somebody's else's game and not having the antennae to know that this is what's going on. So it's been that that's propelled me to get deeper into this political stuff.

One participant remembered an early career incident when he was in a ministerial committee meeting listening to a politician transact some routine business, and the Prime Minister walked in:

P29 (very senior, UK): And he abandoned his speaking notes, and suddenly was turning intellectual somersaults around this very unpromising material, and that was my first and vivid introduction to the idea that politicians, even senior politicians, have an internal party audience.

### *Fostering political astuteness in others*

Several participants mentioned techniques they had used to develop political astuteness in their own staff. One participant from the UK, remembering that she had learnt her political skills on the job, decided that she wanted to foster them more

deliberately in her staff once she became a chief executive. She introduced a training program on working in a political environment, and included sessions where politicians worked with public servants to understand each other's needs and motivation. Others mentored staff, or tried to make space to tell stories or analyse situations:

P08 (senior, AU): I do try to make the time afterwards and encourage that in the staff that work for me, we do a lot of post-mortems and we do a lot of thinking about what happened, why did it work, why didn't it work.

P19 (very senior, NZ): ...just generally our training sessions are heavily focused on these little war stories and what happened back when with what minister and so forth. So they get some of that experience second-hand, and they can add that to their knowledge and they get their own experience and they can sort of put it in context.

P23 (very senior, NZ): We tell a lot of stories. So we have a weekly meeting all together with everybody, and there are other kind of team meetings, and there's lots of sharing of experience, especially near-misses or disasters or things that you learn from.

We now consider the implications of our findings and suggest directions for future research.

## **Discussion**

Our survey data showed that participants from this public management sample largely understood politics in their work in constructive terms. Alliance-building for organisational purposes, dealing with formal politics, reconciling different interests, and environmental scanning were the most frequently endorsed, with turf-protection and personal gain much less prominent. This helps us to understand *what*

competencies participants felt were being developed by the 24 potential methods we suggested in the survey.

One way of categorising our results on the frequency and perceived value of developmental influences might be on the basis of how deliberately each influence is pursued. The most used methods were more experiential and haphazard, where learning about political astuteness arose incidentally in the course of public managers' jobs, while more structured and planned kinds of intervention were less frequently experienced. Boak and Crabbe (2018) also found that even within the category of experiential learning, controlled interventions were considered by participants as less useful than emergent influences such as facing challenges and making mistakes. It is also interesting that the more common learning approaches tended to be those the managers did *on their own* (for example, gaining experience in the job, learning from their own mistakes), whereas activities that involved learning-directed *interaction with others* (e.g. professional coaching, mentoring, or attending a learning set) were much less common influences on political skill. One possible explanation for this is that a degree of illegitimacy still attaches to the notion of managers exercising political astuteness, and that may have discouraged many (though not all) organisations from explicitly devoting resources to develop this skill in their leaders and managers. This accords with the findings of Doldor (2017), whose participants decried the lack of structured training on the political complexities of their jobs (p. 681).

Applying the Hartley (2011) framework (Figure 1 above), the current study shows that most participants learned their political astuteness skills through emergent

rather than planned activity, i.e. in the lower half of the diagram. Their learning can also be placed mainly in the right-hand quadrant in that participants reported job experience, handling crises, learning from mistakes and watching what others do as the most important developmental experiences for their political astuteness. However, learning from these experiences does require at least some time spent in the left-hand quadrant, even if for most participants this was not structured and deliberate. This accords with Day et al.'s (2014) argument that because leadership development takes time, most of it happens in the 'white space' between planned development events, and may not be intentional or mindful (thus making it harder to study).

Individual experience can be valuable for learning and has been found to be important in a range of studies (e.g. Burgoyne et al. 2005). Kotter (1999) has suggested that it takes many years of experience to create an effective leader and this is consistent with the empirical findings here. It is not possible from this research to assess whether those with greater political astuteness skills get promoted or whether political astuteness skills improve through exposure to political contexts at higher levels, but our findings of higher self-rated political skills for more experienced managers are at least consistent with a view of political astuteness skills as being acquired through experience at work.

Some scholars have suggested that hardships are particularly formative of leadership skills and outlooks (e.g. Bennis and Thomas 2004; Moxley and Pulley 2004; Yukl 2013) and this seems to be particularly the case here, where crises are high up on the list of formative experiences (and some of those described in the interviews were dramatic and high-profile). However, experience on its own is

generally seen to be insufficient for leadership development. The aphorism that some people have twenty years' experience while others have a year's experience repeated 20 times reminds us that learning from experience is not automatic. There is also the danger that experience alone can lead to inappropriate conclusions being drawn, in a process called 'superstitious learning' (Levitt and March 1988), resulting in less than effective performance. As Boak and Crabbe (2018) suggest, more challenging experiences do not automatically equate to more development, especially in the absence of institutional support and a positive attitude to learning.

The findings reported here suggest a rather hands-off approach by organisations in developing their middle and senior leaders to handle the complex and dynamic political conditions of public sector organisations. Furthermore, it is known that mistakes and crises in organisations are often covered up (Edmondson 1999; Vince and Saleem 2004) or used in learning-avoiding blame games (Resodihardjo 2019). This creates something of a paradox in that learning from mistakes and crises is reported to be a key means by which political skills are learnt. Mistakes and crises can be valuable learning experiences, which pay future dividends according to the senior and middle managers in this study. But should these experiences be so haphazard, or are there ways to build in reflective learning of political astuteness skills?

What seems important from our data is the opportunity to reflect on experience, by talking to a superior, colleague or coach. There are a number of reasons why this can be developmental, but action learning (Day *et al.* 2014); appreciative enquiry (Cooperrider *et al.* 2008); and knowledge creation through

communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991) or through social interaction (Nonaka 1994) are some of the ways that learning is developed. From the perspective of increasing reflection, it is therefore perhaps surprising that a number of leadership development methods designed to enhance reflection, such as formal mentoring, formal and informal coaching and attending a learning set, were not strongly featured in the methods by which political astuteness skills were developed. This runs somewhat counter to suggestions by Silvester and Wyatt (2018), Doldor (2017) and Blass and Ferris (2007) that mentoring is important for the development of political skills. It is possible that the results found in the current study are because coaching, formal mentoring and other forms of leadership development support are being used outside any language, framework or appreciation about political astuteness. However, *informal* mentoring relationships are not as influenced by the institutionally ‘sticky’ public service distrust of political behaviour, which may explain the higher rating of informal mentoring. The striking example of political mentoring described by P13 above was just such an informal relationship.

### ***Limitations and future research agenda***

This research has deployed both qualitative and quantitative analyses to map key ground in relation to how leaders and managers report learning political skills. This study has largely relied on self-report, particularly for assessments of how political astuteness had been developed. On the basis of self-report, it is difficult to be fully confident that the events and experiences that managers recall are genuinely linked to skill development, so future research on the development of political astuteness could seek to use additional sources of data (e.g. commentary from observers) to triangulate the effectiveness of development methods. This would be particularly valuable

longitudinally, for example before and after an intervention. However, this research has tried to minimise and take account of self-report bias, as reported earlier. Given the limited literature on the development of political skills in public managers, this article provides a useful addition to the empirical literature.

This mixed methods analysis of how political astuteness skills have been developed in a large sample of public sector managers shows that the predominant source of development is experiential routes. There is a general consensus among leadership development researchers that many of the skills, mindsets and behaviours of leadership can be learned – that they are acquired rather than inherited (e.g. Burke 2006; Antonacopolou and Bento 2004; Yukl 2013). This is not to say that everyone is equally open to leadership development or that they are equally capable of learning from leadership development events and experiences (Day et al. 2014). There are some grounds for thinking that lack of interest in acquiring leadership skills may be more prominent in the area of political astuteness skills, given both that some leaders and managers may perceive political astuteness skills to be nefarious, scheming and underhand (Hartley et al. 2013; Butcher and Clarke 1999; Buchanan 2008) and also because political astuteness skills appear to be quite complex and be a type of meta-competency (Hartley et al. 2013). However, that is a point which is open to empirical investigation longer-term.

The framework of modes of development proposed by Hartley (2011) could also be assessed through empirical research in other contexts and with other types of leaders. Further work is needed to examine, for example, the links between different methods of developing political astuteness skills and organisational performance in

detail. This is important across all sectors (private, public and voluntary) but is particularly relevant to leadership by public servants, who work in inherently political environments and organizations.

### ***Implications for public sector leadership development initiatives***

This research has implications for designing development opportunities for organizational leaders, to help them learn about, practice and understand political astuteness. First, there is a wide variety of different means by which public leaders acquire or enhance their political astuteness skills. It seems that different events, experiences and experiences work for different people (and further research might investigate further what works for whom, in what circumstances and why). This means that training providers may need to think quite eclectically about ways to provide development opportunities and look at concurrent means rather than single methods. Second, it is clear that senior public leaders and managers in particular rate experiential methods above other development tools. Middle managers in our study rated some experiential methods lower than senior managers, and rated academic study higher than senior managers, perhaps because at their career stage they had been exposed to less challenging professional experiences. This is consistent with what is known about leadership development in general (e.g. Day et al. 2014; Eva et al. 2019) but as others have argued, experience without reflection can be problematic, so leadership development which fosters reflective practice is to be recommended on the basis of the literature and this research (Mabey 2013). Third, work with civil servants and local government managers also suggests that conceptual frameworks can help leaders by providing an explicit knowledge base on which tacit skills and capabilities can be built (Hartley and Manzie 2020; Baddeley and James 1987; Butcher and

Clarke 2008). Fourth, varied career experiences, whether working abroad or having a challenging job assignment, are seen by public leaders as formative of their political astuteness skills, which links leadership development to addressing not only current leadership needs but also creating the pipeline of future leaders. Fifth, from the interviews we can see that political astuteness skills are fostered and enhanced over time, so adopting a longitudinal mindset when planning development opportunities will be important for organizations and professional associations. Finally and importantly, the research showed that very few public leaders and managers were given experiences of formal events which explicitly talked about and addressed political astuteness, despite the centrality of these skills for public managers. This last point indicates that there is plenty of scope for practical recommendations arising from this research.

Acknowledgements: This work was supported by the Australia and New Zealand School of Government. We acknowledge the contributions of Professor John Alford and Professor Owen Hughes.

## References

- Alford, John, Jean Hartley, Sophie Yates, and Owen Hughes. 2017. "Into the Purple Zone: Deconstructing the Politics/Administration Distinction." *The American Review of Public Administration* 47(7):752–63.
- Algahtani, Ali. 2014. "Are Leadership and Management Different? A Review." *Journal of Management Policies and Practices* 2(3):71–82.
- Ammeter, Anthony P., Ceasar Douglas, William L. Gardner, Wayne A. Hochwarter, and Gerald R. Ferris. 2002. "Toward a Political Theory of Leadership." *The Leadership Quarterly* 13(6):751–96.
- Antonacopoulou, E. P., and R. F. Bento. 2004. "Methods of 'Learning Leadership': Taught and Experiential." Pp. 81–102 in *Leadership in Organizations: Current Issues and Key Trends*, edited by J. Storey. London: Routledge.
- Ayres, Sarah. 2019. "How Can Network Leaders Promote Public Value through Soft Metagovernance?" *Public Administration* 97(2):279–95.
- Baddeley, Simon, and Kim James. 1987. "Owl, Fox, Donkey or Sheep: Political Skills for Managers." *Management Education and Development* 18(1):3–19.
- Benington, John. 2001. Partnership as networked governance? Legitimation, innovation, problem-solving and co-ordination. In *Local Partnerships and Social Exclusion in the European Union*, edited by M. Geddes and J. Benington. London: Routledge
- Benington, John. 2011. "From Private Choice to Public Value?" Pp. 31–51 in *Public Value: Theory and Practice*, edited by J. Benington and M. H. Moore. London: Macmillan Education UK.
- Bennis, Warren and Robert J. Thomas (2004) *Geeks and geezers: How era, values and defining moments shape leaders*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

- Blass, Fred R., and Gerald R. Ferris. 2007. "Leader Reputation: The Role of Mentoring, Political Skill, Contextual Learning, and Adaptation." *Human Resource Management* 46(1):5–19.
- Boak, George, and Sarah Crabbe. 2018. "Experiences That Develop Leadership Capabilities." *Leadership & Organization Development Journal* 40(1):97–106.
- Briscoe, Jon P., and Douglas T. Hall. 1999. "Grooming and Picking Leaders Using Competency Frameworks: An Alternative Approach and New Guidelines for Practice." *Organizational Dynamics* 28(2):37–52.
- Brouer, Robyn L., Allison Duke, Darren C. Treadway, and Gerald R. Ferris. 2009. "The Moderating Effect of Political Skill on the Demographic Dissimilarity — Leader–Member Exchange Quality Relationship." *The Leadership Quarterly* 20(2):61–69.
- Bryson, John, and George Kelley. 1978. "A Political Perspective on Leadership Emergence, Stability, and Change in Organizational Networks." *The Academy of Management Review* 3(4):713–23.
- Buchanan, David A. 2008. "You Stab My Back, I'll Stab Yours: Management Experience and Perceptions of Organization Political Behaviour." *British Journal of Management* 19(1):49–64.
- Burgoyne, John, Mike Pedler and Tom Boydell. 2005. *Leadership Development: Current Practice, Future Perspectives*. London: Corporate Research Forum.
- Burke, Ronald J. 2006. Inspiring leaders: An introduction. In *Inspiring leaders*, edited by R. J. Burke and C. Cooper. London: Routledge.
- Butcher, David, and Martin Clarke. 1999. "Organisational Politics: The Missing Discipline of Management?" *Industrial and Commercial Training* 31(1):9–12.

- Butcher, David, and Martin Clarke. 2003. "Redefining Managerial Work: Smart Politics." *Management Decision* 41(5):477–87.
- Chopin, Suzzette M., Steven J. Danish, Anson Seers, and Joshua N. Hook. 2012. "Effects of Mentoring on the Development of Leadership Self-Efficacy and Political Skill." *Journal of Leadership Studies* 6(3):17–32.
- Cooperrider, David L., Diana Kaplin Whitney, and Jacqueline M. Stavros. 2008. *Appreciative Inquiry Handbook: For Leaders of Change*. 2nd ed. Brunswick, OH: Crown Custom Publishing, Inc. and San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.
- Crosby, Barbara C., and John M. Bryson. 2018. "Why Leadership of Public Leadership Research Matters: And What to Do about It." *Public Management Review* 20(9):1265–86.
- Day, David V., John W. Fleenor, Leanne E. Atwater, Rachel E. Sturm, and Rob A. McKee. 2014. "Advances in Leader and Leadership Development: A Review of 25 Years of Research and Theory." *The Leadership Quarterly* 25(1):63–82.
- Day, David V., and Aiden Thornton. 2018. "Leadership Development." in *The nature of leadership*, edited by J. Antonakis and D. V. Day. SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Demir, Tansu, Christopher G. Reddick, and Branco Ponomariov. 2019. "The Determinants of U.S. City Managers' Sense of Power." *Public Organization Review*.
- Doldor, Elena. 2017. "From Politically Naïve to Politically Mature: Conceptualizing Leaders' Political Maturation Journey." *British Journal of Management* 28(4):666–86.
- Edmondson, Amy. 1999. "Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 44(2):350–83.

- Eiring, Larry. 1999. "Dynamic Office Politics: Powering up for Program Success!" *Information Management Journal* 33(1):17–25.
- Eva, Nathan, Julie Wolfram Cox, Herman Tse, and Kevin Lowe. 2019. From competency to conversation: A multi-perspective approach to collective leadership development. *The Leadership Quarterly*, early online, doi 10.1016/j.leaqua.2019.101346.
- Ferlie, Ewan, Jean Hartley, and Steve Martin. 2003. "Changing Public Service Organizations: Current Perspectives and Future Prospects." *British Journal of Management* 14(s1):S1–14.
- Ferris, Gerald R., William P. Anthony, Robert W. Kolodinsky, David C. Gilmore, and Michael G. Harvey. 2002. "Development of Political Skill." in *Rethinking Management Education for the 21st Century*, edited by C. Wankel and R. DeFillippi. IAP.
- Ferris, Gerald R., Gerhard Blickle, Paula B. Schneider, Jochen Kramer, Ingo Zettler, Jutta Solga, Daniela Noethen, and James A. Meurs. 2008. "Political Skill Construct and Criterion-related Validation: A Two-study Investigation." *Journal of Managerial Psychology* 23(7):744–71.
- Ferris, Gerald R., B. Parker Ellen, Charn P. McAllister, and Liam P. Maher. 2019. "Reorganizing Organizational Politics Research: A Review of the Literature and Identification of Future Research Directions." *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior* 6(1):299–323.
- Ferris, Gerald R., Darren C. Treadway, Robert W. Kolodinsky, Wayne A. Hochwarter, Charles J. Kacmar, Cesar Douglas, and Dwight D. Frink. 2005. "Development and Validation of the Political Skill Inventory." *Journal of Management* 31(1):126–52.

- Fletcher, Clive. 2008. *Appraisal, feedback and development*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. London: Routledge.
- Flick, Uwe. 2018. "Triangulation in Data Collection." Pp. 527–44 in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Collection*, edited by U. Flick. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Gandz, Jeffrey, and Victor V. Murray. 1980. "The Experience of Workplace Politics." *Academy of Management Journal* 23(2):237.
- Garvey, Bob. 2010. "Mentoring for leaders and managers". In *Gower Handbook of Leadership and Management Development*, edited by J. Gold, R. Thorpe, and A. Mumford. Farnham: Gower.
- Grint, Keith. 2005. *Leadership: Limits and possibilities*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hackman, J. Richard, and Ruth Wageman. 2004. "When and How Team Leaders Matter." *Research in Organizational Behavior* 26:37–74.
- Hart, Paul. 2011. "Evaluating Public Leadership: Towards an Assessment Framework." *Public Money & Management* 31(5):323–30.
- Hart, Paul. 2014. *Understanding public leadership*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hartley, Jean. 2011. "Learning in the Whirlwind: Politicians and Leadership Development." *Public Money & Management* 31(5):331–38.
- Hartley, Jean. 2018. "Ten propositions about public leadership." *International Journal of Public Leadership* 14(4):202-217.
- Hartley, Jean. 2020. "Leadership with political astuteness for public servants – and why it matters." In *The Palgrave Handbook of the Public Servant*, edited by H. Sullivan, H. Dickinson and H. Henderson. Palgrave.

- Hartley, Jean, John Alford, Owen Hughes, and Sophie Yates. 2013. *Leading with Political Astuteness: A Study of Public Managers in Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom*. Melbourne: Australia and New Zealand School of Government; Chartered Management Institute.
- Hartley, Jean, John Alford, Owen Hughes, and Sophie Yates. 2015. "Public Value and Political Astuteness in the Work of Public Managers: The Art of the Possible." *Public Administration* 93(1):195–211.
- Hartley, Jean, and Clive Fletcher. 2008. "Leading With Political Awareness: Leadership across Diverse Interests inside and Outside the Organisation." Pp. 163–76 in *Leadership perspectives: Knowledge into action*, edited by K. Turnbull James and J. Collins. Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hartley, Jean, Alessandro Sancino, Mark Bennister, and Sandra L. Resodihardjo. 2019. "Leadership for Public Value: Political Astuteness as a Conceptual Link." *Public Administration* 97(2):239–49.
- Kapoutsis, Ilias, Alexandros Papalexandris, Darren Treadway, and Jeffrey Bentley. 2017. "Measuring Political Will in Organizations: Theoretical Construct Development and Empirical Validation." *Journal of Management* 43(7): 2252–2280
- Kimura, Takuma. 2015. "A Review of Political Skill: Current Research Trend and Directions for Future Research." *International Journal of Management Reviews* 17(3):312–32.
- Kotter, John. 1999. *What leaders really do*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- Lave, Jean, and Etienne Wenger. 1991. *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Levitt, Barbara, and James G. March. 1988. "Organizational Learning." *Annual Review of Sociology* 14(1):319–38.
- Madison, Dan L., Robert W. Allen, Lyman W. Porter, Patricia A. Renwick, and Bronston T. Mayes. 1980. "Organizational Politics: An Exploration of Managers' Perceptions." *Human Relations* 33(2):79–100.
- Mainiero, Lisa A. 1994. "On Breaking the Glass Ceiling: The Political Seasoning of Powerful Women Executives." *Organizational Dynamics* 22(4):5–20.
- Mabey, Christopher. 2013. "Leadership Development in Organizations: Multiple Discourses and Diverse Practice." *International Journal of Management Reviews* 15:359–380
- McAllister, Charn P., B. Parker Ellen, Pamela L. Perrewé, Gerald R. Ferris, and Daniel J. Hirsch. 2015. "Checkmate: Using Political Skill to Recognize and Capitalize on Opportunities in the 'Game' of Organizational Life." *Business Horizons* 58(1):25–34.
- Mintzberg, Henry. (1983). *Power in and around organizations*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Moxley, R., and M. Pulley. 2004. Hardships. In McCauley C and van Velsor E (eds) *Handbook of leadership development 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
- Nonaka, Ikujiro. (1994). A dynamic theory of organizational knowledge creation. *Organization Science*, 5(1), pp. 14–37.
- Oerder, Katharina, Gerhard Blickle, and James K. Summers. 2014. "How Work Context and Age Shape Political Skill." *Journal of Managerial Psychology* 29(5):582–99.

- Pal, Leslie A., and Ian D. Clark. 2015. "Making Reform Stick: Political Acumen as an Element of Political Capacity for Policy Change and Innovation." *Policy and Society* 34(3–4):247–57.
- Perrewé, Pamela L., Gerald R. Ferris, Dwight D. Funk, and William P. Anthony. 2000. "Political Skill: An Antidote for Workplace Stressors." *Academy of Management Executive* 14(3):115–23.
- Perrewé, Pamela L., and Debra L. Nelson. 2004. "Gender and Career Success: The Facilitative Role of Political Skill." *Organizational Dynamics* 33(4):366–78.
- Provis, Chris. 2006. "Organizational Politics, Definitions and Ethics." Pp. 89–106 in *Handbook of Organizational Politics*, edited by E. Vigoda-Gadot and A. Drory. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Resodihardjo, Sandra. 2019. *Crises, Inquiries and the Politics of Blame*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rhodes, Roderick A. W. 2016. "Recovering the Craft of Public Administration." *Public Administration Review* 76(4):638–47.
- Rouleau, L., and J Balogun 2011. Middle managers, strategic sense-making and discursive competence. *Journal of Management Studies* 48:5:953-983.
- Siegel, David. 2020. "Public Servants and Politics: Developing Political Acuity in Local Government." *Canadian Public Administration*, early online, doi 10.1111/capa.12381.
- Silvester, Jo, and Madeleine Wyatt. 2018. "Political Effectiveness at Work." Pp. 228–45 in *The SAGE Handbook of Industrial, Work and Organizational Psychology: Personnel Psychology and Employee Performance*. 1 Oliver's Yard, 55 City Road London EC1Y 1SP: SAGE Publications Ltd.

- Smith, Anne D., Donde Ashmos Plowman, Dennis Duchon, and Amber M. Quinn. 2009. "A Qualitative Study of High-Reputation Plant Managers: Political Skill and Successful Outcomes." *Journal of Operations Management* 27(6):428–43.
- Thiel, Chase, Jason Hill, Jennifer Griffith, and Shane Connelly. 2014. Political tactics as affective events: Implications for individual perception and attitude, *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology* 23(3):419-434,
- Vince, Russ, and Tahir Saleem. 2004. "The Impact of Caution and Blame on Organizational Learning." *Management Learning* 35(2):133–54.
- Waring, Justin, Simon Bishop, Jenelle Clarke, Mark Exworthy, Naomi J. Fulop, Jean Hartley, and Angus I. G. Ramsay. 2018. "Healthcare Leadership with Political Astuteness (HeLPA): A Qualitative Study of How Service Leaders Understand and Mediate the Informal 'Power and Politics' of Major Health System Change." *BMC Health Services Research* 18(1):918.
- Yukl, Gary A. 2013. *Leadership in Organizations*. 8th ed. Boston: Pearson.

Table 1. Equivalent terms to political astuteness

<b>Phrase</b>	<b>Author(s)</b>
Political astuteness	Gandz and Murray 1980; Hartley et al. 2013; Ayres 2019
Political savvy	Bryson and Kelley 1978; Demir et al. 2019
Political awareness	Baddeley and James 1987; Hartley and Fletcher 2008
Political acumen	Perrewé and Nelson 2004; Hackman and Wageman 2005; Pal and Clark 2015
Political acuity	Siegel 2020
Political ‘nous’	Rhodes 2016
Socio-political intelligence	Burke 2006
Political skills	Ferris et al. 2005; 2008; 2019
Political antennae	‘t Hart 2011; Benington 2011

Table 2. The framework of political astuteness skills

Dimension	Description
Strategic direction and scanning	Strategic thinking and action in relation to organizational purpose. Thinking long-term and having a road map of the journey. Not diverted by short-term pressures. Scanning: thinking about longer-term issues in the environment which may potentially have an impact on the organization. Attention to what is over the horizon. Analytical capacity to think through scenarios of possible futures. Noticing small changes which may herald bigger shifts in society. Analysing and managing uncertainty. Keeping options open rather than reaching for a decision prematurely.
Building alignment and alliances	Detailed appreciation of context, players and objectives of stakeholders in relation to the alignment goal. Recognizing difference and plurality and forge them into collaborative action even where there are substantial differences in outlook or emphasis. Works with difference and conflicts of interest not just finding consensus and commonality. Actively seeking out alliances and partnerships rather than relying on those already in existence. Ability to bring difficult issues into the open and deal with differences between stakeholders. Knowing when to exclude particular interests. Creating useful and realistic consensus not common denominator.
Reading people and situations	Analysing or intuiting the dynamics which can or might occur when stakeholders and agendas come together. Recognition of different interests and agendas of both people and their organizations. Discerning the underlying not just the espoused agendas. Thinking through the likely standpoints of various interest groups in advance. Using knowledge of institutions, processes and social systems to understand what is or what might happen. Recognizing when you may be seen as a threat to others. Understanding power relations.
Interpersonal skills	‘Soft’ skills: ability to influence the thinking and behaviour of others. Getting buy-in from those over whom the person has no direct authority. Making people feel valued. ‘Tough’ skills: ability to negotiate, able to stand up to pressures from other people, able to handle conflict in order to achieve constructive outcomes. Coaching and mentoring individuals to develop their own political skills.
Personal skills	Self-awareness of one’s own motives and behaviours. Ability to exercise self-control, being open to the views of others, ability to listen to others and reflect on and be curious about their views. Having a proactive disposition (initiating rather than passively waiting for things to happen).

Source: Hartley *et al.*, 2013

Table 3. Demographic profile of survey participants

<b>Characteristic</b>		<b>Number</b>
Country	Australia	454
	New Zealand	69
	UK	489
Sex	Male	665
	Female	339
	Did not answer	8
Age	Under 40	92
	40-49	347
	50-59	469
	60+	100
Size of organisation (employees)	Fewer than 100	54
	101-1,000	280
	1,001-5,000	279
	5,001-10,000	214
	Over 10,000	219
Managerial level	Department head, Deputy Department head, Director or equivalent	187
	Senior manager	627
	Middle manager	194
	Did not answer	4
Total participants		1012

Table 4. Which of the following comes closest to your understanding of politics in your work as a manager?\*

<b>Understanding of politics</b>	<b>%</b>
Alliance-building to achieve organisational objectives	63
Formal processes and institutions of government	56
Scanning factors in external environment that the organisation needs to consider	49
Ways in which different interests are reconciled	44
People 'protecting their turf'	19
Pursuit of personal advantage	10

\*Participants were invited to tick up to three options. Results are ordered from most to least popular.

Table 5. Prevalence and value of development methods to participants (n = 1012)

Development method	How useful?*	Standard deviation	Participants exposed to this method
Gaining experience in the job	3.18	0.69	99%
Learning from own mistakes	3.16	0.71	99%
Handling crises	3.16	0.73	98%
Good example of senior manager	3.1	0.79	98%
Observing role models	2.93	0.75	98%
Seeing how things were done elsewhere	2.65	0.77	95%
Bad example of senior manager	2.88	0.95	94%
General (leisure) reading	2.12	0.93	94%
Working with other organisations	2.74	0.78	93%
Reading leadership books	1.92	0.89	93%
Own family	2.2	1.07	92%
Attending development courses	2.28	0.89	92%
Experience outside work	2.6	0.95	92%
Having time out to reflect	2.68	0.93	90%
Informal mentoring	2.75	0.79	89%
Academic study	2.35	1	87%
360 degree feedback	2.4	0.95	80%
Feedback from psychometrics	1.89	0.99	75%
Working with elected politicians	2.53	1.11	71%
Informal coaching	2.38	0.86	69%
Attending a learning set	2.11	0.94	67%
Formal mentoring	2.03	0.99	51%
Professional coaching	2.03	1.05	47%
Secondment to another organisation	2.69	0.97	44%

\* Mean rating from 0 (of no value) – 4 (extremely valuable)

Table 6. Factor analysis overview of development methods

	1 Study/ training	2 Experience and reflection	3 Coaching and mentoring	4 Learning from self and others	5 Observation
Reading leadership books	.749				
Attending a learning set	.743				
Academic study	.682				
Attending development courses	.619			.348	
General (leisure) reading	.517	.350			
Experience outside work		.690			
Learning from own mistakes		.664			
Own family		.627			
Handling crises		.610			.384
Gaining experience in the job		.553			.347
Having time out to reflect		.552			
Formal mentoring			.760		
Professional coaching	.336		.756		
Informal coaching			.683		.334
Informal mentoring			.569		.491
Working with other organisations		.330		.728	
Seeing how things were done elsewhere		.341		.688	
Secondment to another organisation				.641	
360 degree feedback	.343			.468	
Feedback from psychometrics	.459			.461	
Observing role models					.684
Good example of senior manager					.661
Working with elected politicians					.550
Bad example of senior manager					.478

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

a. Rotation converged in 8 iterations.

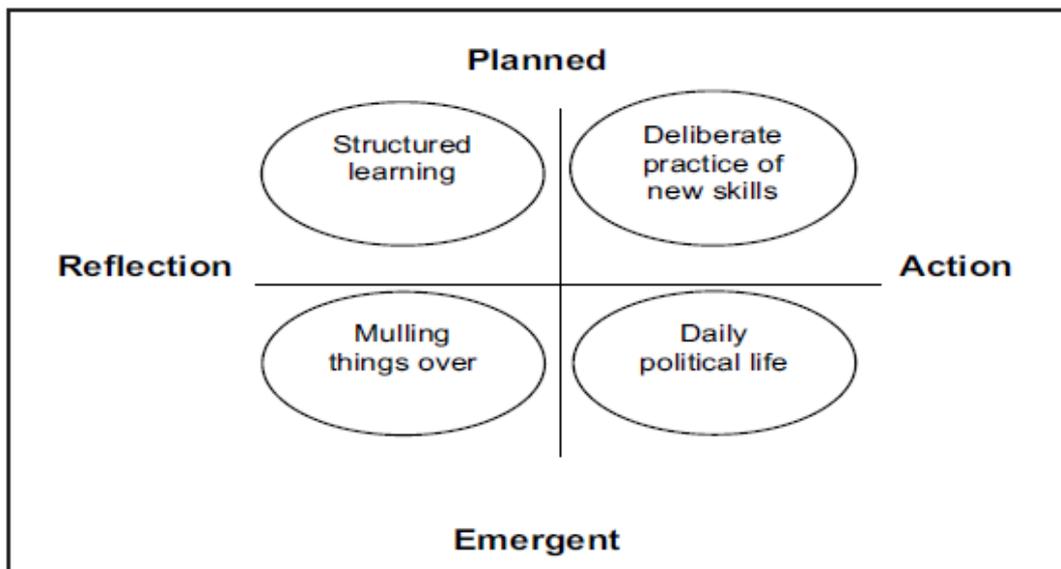
Table 7. Differences in self-ratings by managerial level (ANOVA with post-hoc Bonferroni)

	Very senior	Senior	Middle	F-statistic	p
Personal skills	4.41	4.27	4.06	17.010	.000
Interpersonal skills	4.36	4.27	4.03	15.591	.000
Reading people and situations	4.30	4.16	3.86	23.367	.000
Building alignment and alliances	4.18	4.05	3.79	17.943	.000
Strategic direction and scanning	4.38	4.20	3.77	41.053	.000

Table 8. Differences in self-ratings by experience of working overseas (t-test for independent means)

	Worked overseas	Never worked overseas	t-statistic	p
Personal skills	4.30	4.20	2.466	.014
Interpersonal skills	4.3	4.16	3.386	.001
Reading people and situations	4.18	4.06	2.668	.008
Building alignment and alliances	4.11	3.93	4.220	.000
Strategic direction and scanning	4.23	4.06	3.695	.000

Figure 1. A framework of leadership development



Source: Hartley, 2011

Figure 2. Managers' self-reported political skill levels compared to their assessment of senior managers in their organisation (rating scale of 1-6)

