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Citation

Hartley, Jean (2021). Leadership with Political Astuteness for Public Servants: And Why It Matters. In: Sullivan, Helen; Dickinson, Helen and Henderson, Hayley eds. The Palgrave Handbook of the Public Servant. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, pp. 493–513.

URL

<https://oro.open.ac.uk/102739/>

DOI

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-29980-4_9

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Leadership with political astuteness for public servants– and why it matters

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Chapter in Sullivan H, Dickinson H and Henderson H (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of the Public Servant*. Published 2021.

ABSTRACT

This chapter argues that political astuteness for public leaders and managers really matters, because it enables them to navigate the dual demands of having a nuanced and detailed understanding of informal and formal politics in order to work with a range of stakeholders over complex and contested public policy and services, but also refraining from being party political. This chapter explores these tensions by examining the construct, the theory and the empirical evidence about leadership with political astuteness. It draws on highlights from three literatures and a large cross-national empirical project based on a survey and interviews, as well as other studies to unpack what is meant by political astuteness and to present an evidence-based framework of the key skills or capabilities which underlie effective political astuteness. The chapter notes that capabilities on their own are insufficient to be effective because the job demands, and the organizational and institutional context create constraints and expectations. The chapter also examines the ethics of political astuteness and argues, perhaps counter-intuitively, that political astuteness enables public leaders to maintain an ethical approach to their work. Overall,

political astuteness can be used for constructive purposes and is predominantly seen as legitimate by public leaders and managers. Addressing complex problems and challenges, with multiple stakeholders where there are diverse and sometimes competing interests, values and goals requires leadership beyond technical, rational management. Political astuteness matters too.

KEYWORDS

Politics; political astuteness; political savvy; leadership; leaders; ethics; capabilities, political skills

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between public leaders and managers with politics is “complicated”. They work for organizations which are inherently political, both because they are led or steered by elected (and sometimes appointed) politicians and because many of the policy and service issues they deal with are complex and contested within society and have multiple stakeholders. It is therefore helpful to their work as leaders that they understand and can work with both formal and informal politics. On the other hand, public servants, in democratic societies, must not become too closely involved in politics, particularly in Westminster systems where the public service is permanent, serving the government of the day so their service is expected to be party-politically neutral. The conflicting pressures are particularly apparent for those public servants who are in formal leadership roles, for example executive team members, and those heading up departments, sections or who have large areas of

responsibility. How do public servants navigate these tensions between different expectations?

This chapter argues that exercising political astuteness enables leaders to stay alert to the tensions, the limits and the opportunities of working with multiple stakeholders who may have diverse goals, values and interests and to navigate these sometimes choppy waters in order to achieve constructive outcomes for the organization and society. Furthermore, and seemingly paradoxically, political astuteness enables the public leader to behave ethically, by being aware of the pitfalls of ignoring underlying interests or getting too close to particular stakeholders. Political astuteness enables public servants to get things done, while it also enables them to avoid crossing into the domain of the politician to an undue extent. The chapter argues that political astuteness is not only useful for public servants and their organizations, but also that it is legitimate.

In order to address these seeming conundrums about political astuteness, (also called 'savvy', 'nous', acumen or having political antennae), the chapter starts by drawing on three relevant literatures from political science, public management and general management about politics and political astuteness in the workplace and covering both informal and formal politics, what is sometimes called small p and big P politics. The chapter then explores political astuteness, both conceptually and within a framework of capabilities (called skills as a shorthand) which has been derived from empirical research with public leaders and managers in Australia, New Zealand and the UK. Evidence from this extensive quantitative and qualitative research is used in places to develop the argument and present the framework. This is the first detailed framework of capabilities for senior and middle ranking public managers, and represents a substantial step forward in identifying how public

leaders can be effective through exercising political astuteness. However, capabilities can be effective to the extent of their particular interactions with job demands (which vary from job to job and service to service) along with the impact of the organizational and institutional context. These matters are explored in the chapter, reinforcing the need for leaders to 'read' the context in which they are working. The chapter also addresses ethical questions about political astuteness, particularly in the context of working with politicians, where the line or zone between their work may be particularly sensitive (though this is relevant in other settings too). The chapter offers a framework to try to achieve the fine balance in working in this dual leadership context and shows that political astuteness actually contributes to recognizing and addressing ethically sensitive situations. It can help rather than hinder ethical behaviors.

Overall, by exploring key constructs such as politics and political astuteness, by providing frameworks for thinking about capabilities and for ethics, and by drawing on empirical research, this chapter argues that a reliance on pure technical and rational management is insufficient for public servants, and that wise leaders will exercise political astuteness in addition.

This chapter focuses on public servants in paid positions who are leading significant teams and substantial resources, across all public services, including central, devolved or local government, policing, prisons, healthcare, military, transport and infrastructure. It is particularly pertinent to senior and middle managers who are responsible for leading others – mobilizing the time and attention of others across a range of stakeholders, not only their subordinates (Hartley, 2018). The chapter excludes special advisors in Westminster systems and senior officials appointed for

a term of office in presidential systems because they are appointed specifically for their party-political activities.

CONTRASTING VIEWS OF POLITICS AND POLITICAL ASTUTENESS IN THE LITERATURE

The political science, public administration and generic management academic fields each have, broadly, two approaches to addressing the challenges of politics for neutral public servants. From political science one view argues that public servants must have no truck with politics because there should be a clear and unambiguous division of labor between the work of politicians (policy, decision-making) and the work of 'bureaucrats' or 'administrators' (advice, implementation). This is sometimes called the 'politics/administration dichotomy' and its principles were set out over a hundred years ago by Wilson in 1886: *"Administration lies outside the proper sphere of politics. Administrative questions are not political questions. Although politics sets the tasks for administration, it should not be suffered to manipulate its offices. Public administration is detailed and systematic execution of public law"* (Wilson, 1941).

This approach has strong normative force, based on the democratic value that unelected public servants ought to be subordinate to elected politicians (Hughes, 2017). However, that this is based on a rather outmoded view of "administrators" whereas many public servants are leaders in their own right (of staff, of organizations) and not simply administering.

On the other hand, many academics have noted that the pure dichotomy rarely holds in practice but rather that there is a blurring, overlap or complementarity between the tasks and roles of politics and 'administration' (Aberbach and Rockman 1988; Svava

2001; Demir and Reddick 2012). A degree of overlap is perhaps unsurprising, given that bureaucracies themselves can never be purely rational (Hickman, 2010). Additionally, the increasing presence of 'wicked' policy and public service issues (Head and Alford, 2015; Rittel and Webber, 1973) makes a simple distinction between decision and execution unrealistic. Alford et al (2016) suggest that there is sometimes a line and sometimes a zone between politician and public servant, reflecting different services, contexts, issues and leadership qualities of the politician and that the space is more a negotiated order than clear roles. Svava (2001) also notes variations in the degree of separation or overlap. 't Hart and Wille (2006) found that ministers report liking to work with public servants who exhibited political sensitivity. However, while the debate has led to a wider consideration of roles, there is less (though some) literature about the behaviors or skills which help public servants to navigate that space.

Public administration as a field has also exhibited contrasting views. The rise and rule of new public management for some sustained time (Hood, 1991; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011) had in part been based on the separation of politics from management so that managers could manage without political 'interference'.

Contracting out services and arms-length agencies were part of trying to structurally impose separation and keep politics out of public administration. It was only partially successful as rules proliferated (Andrews et al, 2008; Hood, 2006) and as it became increasingly difficult to address wicked problems involving multiple stakeholders, which required a different, more politically astute approach (new public governance). The contrasting view from public administration is that it is inevitably concerned with politics. Gray and Jenkins (1995) note that "*it is important to recognize that neither the study nor practice of public administration or public management can be divorced*

from politics” and from an earlier article they advocate that there should be “*systematic recognition of bureaucracies as political organizations*” (Jenkins and Gray, 1983. p.178). Rhodes (2015) has argued for the importance of rediscovering and appreciating the craft skills of public servants. In the literature, there has been less exploration of skills than perhaps might be expected, though Baddeley and James (1987a,b) and Hartley et al (, 2013, 2015) have researched some of the key capabilities to work with political savvy in the public service and some of this work will be examined in more detail below.

The third set of ambiguities arise from the management discipline, whether in the private, public or voluntary sector. For quite some time the influence of Weber’s (1922) work on bureaucracy and F. W. Taylor’s (1911) seminal work creating the scientific management movement had led to the view that management of workplaces must be technical, rational, fair and procedural, with no place for politics. Politics came to be seen as illegitimate, dysfunctional, self-serving and devious, and therefore should have no place in the new profession of management. Over time, however, politics intruded into many studies of organizations but was initially labelled ‘politicking’ (e.g. Pfeffer, 1992; Mintzberg, 1983, 1985) and seen as a dark malign force, sometimes called ‘Machiavellian’ in reference to the supposedly amoral guidance of Machiavelli’s *The Prince* (1961) while ignoring his writings in *The discourses* (1984).

However, a different perspective about the role of politics in management has been growing over the last two decades. Some academics have noted that politics in the workplace can contribute to highly functional outcomes, for example, greater clarity through contention over ideas and plans; forging a degree of consensus and agreement where there are diverse views; and managing complex organizational

change (Block, 1987; Mangham, 1979, Perrewé et al 2007). Buchanan's (2008) study of UK managers found that over half thought that politics contributed to organizational effectiveness and a recent meta-analytic review found similar variation in perceptions of workplace politics (Hochwarter et al, 2020). There is now growing recognition and acceptance that politics is "the missing discipline of management" (Butcher and Clarke, 1999) and that it is "smart management" to use politics in organizations (Butcher and Clarke, 2008). Rouleau and Balogun (2011, 956) note '*increasing evidence from research on both senior and middle managers of their need to be "politically able".*' Others have noted that such abilities are in greater demand as a manager moves up the hierarchy, because objectives become more ambiguous, complex and conflicting (Madison et al, 1980; March, 1984). Thus, the generic management literature has started to rehabilitate politics as a valuable and even necessary skill for managers, particularly in senior ranks which are leadership roles.

Overall, then, from three quite varied parts of the social sciences (political science, public administration/management and generic management) there are different strands of thought and empirical studies about the value or otherwise of politics in organizations at all and in public services in particular, reflecting ambiguities in how managers and public servants should navigate these choppy waters. The view of politics has implications for whether or not it is seen as legitimate for public leaders to exercise political astuteness in their work.

There are, of course, embedded in these debates and research studies across all these literatures, three different conceptualizations of 'politics', each of which is relevant to considering political astuteness. The first concerns the formal institutions, actors and processes of the state including elected politicians (at least in democratic

societies). From this definition comes the concerns in the 'politics/administration dichotomy' about separating the work and roles of appointed officials from those of elected politicians. The second concept concerns party politics, where again public servants are expected to show neutrality (Asmeron and Reis 1996), particularly where such engagement is not permitted, as in Westminster systems (Hood and Lodge 2006). The third definition includes both formal and informal activities concerned with understanding and managing diverse and sometimes competing interests in groups, organizations and societies, which covers both informal politics in the workplace as well as formal politics - both small p and big P politics (Hartley and Fletcher 2008; Alford et al, 2016; Buchanan, 2008).

In some formal institutional arrangements, party politics is prominent, in some attenuated, and in some absent, so there are varied landscapes in which the work of public servants is set. Avoiding party politics while working with institutional and informal politics is a key capability for effective public servants.

RESEARCH EVIDENCE ON PUBLIC LEADERS VIEW OF POLITICS

How do public servants themselves view politics in their own work? Research with over one thousand public leaders (mainly senior but also some middle-ranking managers) in Australia, New Zealand and the UK, across a wide range of public services and at federal, devolved/state and local levels (Hartley et al, 2013, 2015) explored this. Survey participants were asked to tick up to three options from a list of six about "which of the following comes closest to your understanding of politics in your work as a manager". The results are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

The very clear picture which emerged is that public managers in all three countries had a generally positive and constructive view of politics in their own work. The most frequently cited were all meanings with positive or neutral connotations: alliance-building to achieve organizational objectives (63% overall); the formal processes and institutions of government (56%); scanning factors in the external environment (49%); and ways in which different interests are reconciled (44%). By contrast, a much smaller percentage viewed politics in terms of the pursuit of personal advantage (10%) and people protecting their turf (19%). The pattern is consistent by breakdown across the three countries, each with a similar overall profile, though noticeably UK public servants are more likely than their Antipodean counterparts to subscribe to the negative and self-interested view of politics.

THE CONCEPT OF POLITICAL ASTUTENESS

Public servants have to work not only with or for elected politicians but also with a wide range of other actors, institutions and stakeholders. This becomes more pronounced as they become more senior. Those in middle and senior management roles, in particular, may have to work in cross-departmental groups and forums in their organization or across government, they may work with civil society organizations and with social movements that advocate on behalf of particular causes or interest organizations. They may work with the private sector to stimulate economic, climate change or other initiatives. Public servants may, from time to time, have to face the media to explain particular policies, events or problems.

Some may be working with global institutions and across all sectors to address certain challenges like climate change, trade talks or health pandemics. At any level, public servants may encounter cliques and factions within their own team, section or organization. So, overall, public servants may work in situations where their legitimacy only partly rests on their formal authority but is also based on persuasion, influence and engagement skills. Technical expertise skills and judgements may be necessary but insufficient: they will be helped by having political astuteness skills. Such skills can be valuable wherever there is contention, or potential contention, over purposes, priorities, resources and outcomes.

Political astuteness is accordingly defined here as *“deploying political skills in situations involving diverse and sometimes competing interests and stakeholders, in order to achieve sufficient alignment of interests and/or consent in order to achieve outcomes”* (Hartley et al, 2013, p 6).

This definition is neutral about the outcomes of the use of political astuteness skills. Political astuteness can be used to pursue personal, self-interested ends as well as address organizational or societal interests. The intentions behind political astuteness may be malign (self-serving, devious, back-stabbing) or benign (creating public value, overcoming differences of view to create constructive outcomes) for society. This is, of course, made more complicated by the interpretations which human beings make of each other’s behavior, drawing inferences about motivation which may or may not be warranted. Attribution theory in psychology examines how interpretations of behavior can vary widely according to the perspective of actor or observer (Hewstone, 1989). Interestingly, Machiavelli (1984) noted this point in different theoretical language, in *The Discourses*. For example, one person may believe they have been politically astute in taking certain action for the good of

society while an observer perceives only self-interested, career-enhancing behavior. The ambiguities of political behaviors have just got even more ambiguous with the consideration of attributional processes.

In this chapter and the theoretical and empirical research which underpins it, the language of 'political astuteness' is deployed. This captures both political awareness and also reflects the ability to take action in order to create alignment across diverse or even competing interests.

There are a set of capabilities of individuals (and it can be of teams and organizations, but here the focus is on individuals) which underpin political astuteness. This requires a little unpacking. Capability itself has been derived from notions of competency (but without connotations of standards of performance) (Boyatzis, 2006) which are "*combinations of knowledge, skills, abilities, and other individual differences (KSAOs) that are necessary for performance in a given job or job family*" (Sliter, 2015, p. 285-286). This therefore covers not only skills but also knowledge, experience, attributes, behaviors and judgements that an individual needs to perform a job effectively (Hartley and Benington, 2010). Skill is, in technical terms, only part of this cluster, but is a useful shorthand, both simpler and also because a number of academics talk (in a non-psychological way) about skill. For example, Ferris (2019) and others have a substantial program of work about 'political skill' in the workplace (though not in a public servant context and not about leadership). Rhodes (2015) argues for the importance of rediscovering and appreciating the "*craft skills*" of public servants which for him include "*counselling, stewardship, prudence, probity, judgment, diplomacy, and political nous*" in civil servants (p. 638). Dickinson et al (2015) discuss roles, skills and capabilities of the

future public servant. Massey (2007) notes that public administrations need to be staffed with competent, honest officials who are skilled in the art of statehood.

There is a danger that ‘capability’ or ‘skill’ comes to be seen solely as an individual attribute which guarantees success and that the focus is therefore entirely on individual behavior and qualities. Some people may be more ‘politically astute’ than others and therefore ‘better’ or ‘more effective’ leaders or managers. However, Boyatzis’ (2006) theory of job action and performance is a reminder that capabilities can be necessary but not sufficient to create effective performance. Also important are the job demands (which in public service are often varied, ambiguous and contested) and the organizational environment (the strategy, structure, culture and processes of the wider organization, set in its larger context) which, for public service reflects not just organizational context but the policy context, and often in a democratic setting. This is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2 about here

This means that in examining political astuteness in leadership for public servants this chapter examines not only the capabilities (skills) but also the job demands and the wider context.

A FRAMEWORK OF POLITICAL ASTUTENESS

Three frameworks for understanding the skills of political astuteness are potentially relevant to public leaders.

Ferris and colleagues (e.g. Ferris et al, 2005, 2019) have outlined a quantitative measure of political skill, based on cognitive, affective and behavioral elements. The measure is located in a view of politics as being deceptively manipulative (for example, one dimension is “apparent sincerity”) and is only focused on informal (‘office politics’) settings. Their work tends to be focused on politics in small groups and teams, which is the locus from which the measure was derived. They have not studied public servants as a distinct occupational group and also their work is on political skill at any level in the hierarchy, whereas the focus of this chapter is on organizational leaders. Therefore, this framework is less relevant for a context where both formal and informal politics play out and where there are additional demands and pressures on leaders.

Baddeley and James’s (1987a,b) framework derives from research with local government managers. Their model comprises two key dimensions of political awareness. The first is of “reading”, which are the skills an individual deploys to understand the context and the various stakeholders. The second dimension is “carrying”, which are the skills used by an individual to exercise self-control. This is expressed on a dimension from, at one extreme, acting with integrity, based on accepting oneself and others as they are to, at the other extreme, psychological game-playing and being self-oriented. This conceptual work led to the characterization of public managers operating in four quadrants based on the two dimensions of reading and carrying (fox, owl, donkey and sheep). This work accepts that political awareness can be used constructively or destructively.

Finally, the program of research of Hartley, with colleagues, developed and tested a five-dimensional framework for conceptualizing leadership with political astuteness, particularly for public servants. The original research was conducted in the UK with

nearly 1500 managers across the public, private and voluntary sectors (Hartley and Fletcher, 2008). The second phase of research was undertaken with over one thousand public leaders and managers in three Westminster system countries: Australia, New Zealand and UK (Hartley et al, 2013; Hartley et al, 2015; Manzie and Hartley, 2013; Alford et al, 2016). Since then, the framework has been applied in UK policing (Hartley et al, 2019a) and links leadership to public value (Hartley et al, 2019b).

This framework conceptualizes political astuteness skills in neutral terms, recognizing that such skills can be deployed either for self-interest or to meet constructive organizational or societal purposes. There are five dimensions (ascending from the 'micro' personal level to the 'macro' strategic level) and these are interconnected. Together, they can be seen as a meta-capability. They are shown in Figure 3. These have been developed as a 50-item self-report measure of political astuteness. A modified version is used with observers. These dimensions are as follows.

Figure 3 about here

Personal skills: Self-awareness of one's own motives and behaviors, and the ability to exercise self-control form an essential foundation for political astuteness. The personal skills dimension is also about being open to alternative views so that it is possible to listen and reflect on the views of others and be curious about them. It includes having a proactive disposition, initiating rather than waiting for things to happen (though this may include proactively deciding to 'force' a move from an

opponent before acting oneself). To some extent these are capabilities which are valuable in any effective leader and are not distinctively about political astuteness (other than being proactive). But without the firm underpinning of personal skills, the 'higher' skills of political astuteness will not be effective.

Interpersonal skills: This dimension concerns the interpersonal capacity to influence the thinking and behavior of others, get buy-in from people over whom the skill user has no direct authority, and make people feel valued. These are 'tough' as well as 'soft' skills because the ability to negotiate, to stand up to pressures from other people, and to handle conflict in ways to achieve constructive outcomes is important. This dimension also includes interpersonal skills such as cultivating relationships which have potential rather than immediate value. Knowing when to rely on position and authority and when to rely on less direct methods of exerting influence is also part of this dimension.

Reading people and situations: This dimension has a strong analytical aspect to it, but also includes judgement and intuition about the dynamics that can occur when stakeholders and agendas come together. It includes recognizing the differing interests and agendas of a variety of people and their organizations. It involves discerning what may be the underlying as opposed to the espoused agendas of individuals and organizations. This entails thinking through the likely standpoints of varying interest groups in advance of dealing with them, and using a wider knowledge of institutions, political processes and social systems to understand what might happen. It also includes recognizing where one may be seen as a threat to others and their interests. This dimension lies at the heart of political astuteness skills, as it concerns the power, influence and interests of different groups. This dimension is about understanding rather than influencing.

Building alignment and alliances: This dimension is a crucial skill of action, which requires the previous dimensions in order to be effective. Building alignment out of different interests, goals and motives requires a detailed understanding and appreciation of the context, the players and the objectives of each stakeholder. It is about forging collaborative action out of sometimes very different outlooks or goals. This dimension goes beyond that part of the literature on partnerships or collaboration which privileges finding consensus and commonality over dealing with difference. Instead, this dimension of skill involves working with difference and with conflicts of interest in order to foster new opportunities as well as in situations where there are shared goals. It builds on the proactivity of personal skills in actively seeking out alliances and partnerships rather than relying on those which are already in existence. It includes being able to bring out and deal with differences between stakeholders, not conceal them or hope that if they are ignored they will somehow go away. Tough negotiation skills (from interpersonal skills) may underpin the capacity to build a realistic and useful consensus without ending up with the lowest common denominator.

Strategic direction and scanning: This dimension includes two major elements. The first is strategic thinking and action in relation to organizational purpose, so that the understanding of power, interests and influence is set within strategic aims. This includes thinking long-term and having a road map of where the leader wants to go so that he or she is not diverted by short-term pressures or stakeholder insistence. Secondly, this dimension requires strategic scanning – thinking about longer-term issues that may have the potential to have an impact on the organization, not just on the horizon but over the horizon. It requires analytical capacity to think through scenarios of possible futures, to think about small changes which may herald bigger

shifts in society and the economy, and to find ways to analyze and manage (as far as possible) the uncertainty that lies outside the organization. This last includes being able to keep options open rather than reaching for a decision prematurely.

HOW PUBLIC SERVANTS RATE THEIR OWN AND OTHERS' POLITICAL ASTUTENESS

When it comes to judging their own and their peers' political astuteness (using the 50 items in the 5-dimension skills questionnaire, see Hartley et al, 2013), public managers in all three countries were fairly stern in their judgments. On the whole, they saw their own and their colleagues' political skills as only average to good, especially the macro skills. This is, perhaps, a little surprising in psychological terms due to the existence of the leniency bias (also called illusory superiority) whereby self-raters tend to unconsciously inflate their own scores relative to others (Cheng et al, 2017). These are not public service leaders wearing rose-tinted spectacles. Analysis of scores shows wide variation on ratings on the five dimensions. In interviews with some of them, they were often very self-critical about their skills in political astuteness. The overall ratings are shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4 about here

Respondents generally rated their own political skills more highly than those of a chosen superior whom they knew well (overall, 4.16 compared to 3.84 on a six-point scale; see Figure 4). One interesting exception, however, was in their assessment of how effective their superior was at 'reading people and situations'. On this

dimension, respondents rated their fellow leaders slightly more highly than themselves.

The research also showed interesting differences within subgroups. Those who had a more constructive view of politics in the workplace also tended to report higher levels of political astuteness – or to put it the other way, those with a more ‘Machiavellian’ view of politics (self-interest, people protecting their turf) reported themselves as being less skilled in terms of political astuteness. There are many issues to tease out from this which a survey on its own cannot resolve. One plausible explanation is that people who see politics in the workplace as negative or who dislike it pay less attention to acquiring or enhancing such skills.

This research also found that there was a rising profile of self-rated political skill from middle managers, through senior to very senior leaders in the survey findings. These differences held true for all five dimensions of political astuteness. This is consistent with the literature which indicates that 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). They may also have more opportunity to practice such skills given the ambiguity and complexity of more senior roles (Gandz and Murray, 1980). However, it is possible to speculate that in addition more politically astute public servants get promoted.

This research also found that women reported being as politically astute as men, based on self-rated skills. It has been argued that gender differences in leadership and management are more about perceptions of appropriate behavior by gender than about actual skill (e.g. Sinclair 2005). Buchanan’s (2008) study indicated that women managers appear to engage in political tactics as readily as men, so it seems

that women leaders not only feel equally effective in this domain, but they are also equally active.

EXERCISING POLITICAL ASTUTENESS SKILLS IN JOB AND ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT

Systematically identifying and empirically assessing key capabilities of political astuteness is one thing but exercising them is another. This is shaped by at least four factors. The job demands and the context also affect whether and how political astuteness is deployed and whether it is effective.

First, political astuteness skills, like any kind of influence, leadership or power processes are fundamentally about relations between people. A public leader may wish to “display consistency between words and actions to build the trust of others” (one item in the Hartley et al, 2013 measure) but whether others perceive consistency and whether that leads to trust is affected by the ‘recipient’ of influence, and the quality and history of their relationship. Or “exhibiting a good sense of timing – knowing when to act or intervene” (another item in the measure) is dependent on the opinions and attitudes of others, and these may well be very varied. Political astuteness research would benefit from further attention to how public servants generally regarded by their peers as politically astute (or politically clumsy, politically naïve) are perceived by others, what influences those perceptions and whether those perceptions change in identifiable ways. An additional research area concerns reputation and how that shapes the ability to influence: many senior public servants in particular arrive at a new post with a reputation from their former service or

department and this may shape how they are perceived and the attributions given to their behaviors, including their 'political' behaviors.

A key relationship, of course, is the relationship between senior public servant and government minister (or leader at local government level). This is a form of dual leadership which has been characterized as "dancing on ice" (Manzie and Hartley, 2013) which involves "*the sense of moving together, giving each other space, sometimes one in the spotlight, sometimes the other, where sometimes the partnership may stumble and occasionally fall, encapsulates this dual leadership relationship as it operates in the UK constitutional system. The politically astute professional has to feel and breathe the politician's objectives sufficiently to reflect the latter's goals in their own leadership*". (p. 4). In this setting, it is the relationship which is central to the effectiveness of political astuteness – though political astuteness helps in the public servant's management of that relationship (Alford et al, 2016).

A second factor in the exercise of political astuteness relates to the purposes which the public servant is trying to execute. A police officer investigating, cautioning or arresting an elected politician has a different intention and need for political astuteness than a private office civil servant helping an elected politician to formulate a new, complex and contested policy. A public servant working with community groups in local economic development may adopt a different approach and language from one working only in the upper echelons of the civil service. In local government, as a local democratic body, taking into account the interests of the local politicians pervades much local government work, whereas in local public health services, politicians are likely to be much more arms-length if noticed at all, with health managers focusing more on medical matters and less on democratic issues.

Services with coercive or regulatory purposes may be viewed in a different light from those which are welfare services, in terms of their use of political astuteness.

This is partly about “reading context and situations” but what behaviors emerge from that reading will greatly vary according to the context and the stakeholders.

Adapting communications and behaviors to suit different ‘audiences’ or stakeholders can be seen as politically astute but it can also, in some situations, lead to perceptions of the public leader being regarded as chameleon-like, saying what people want to hear. There are no guarantees in exercising political astuteness and it can backfire, dependent on the reaction of others. Most public leaders interviewed were able to identify a time when their attempts to be politically astute had failed (Hartley et al, 2013; Hartley and Manzie, 2020).

The third factor in the exercise of political astuteness skills is in the constitutional and institutional frameworks within which public servants operate. Some countries, such as the UK, Australia and New Zealand, operate in Westminster systems, with the executive drawn from the legislature and with a permanent civil service. Others have a strict separation of legislature and executive and have politically appointed public servants, such as the USA. These create very different roles for public servants and therefore different contexts in which to deploy political astuteness. In Westminster systems, public servants working in central government are proscribed from participating in party political activities as they must serve the government of the day. In UK local government, the institutional rules mean that public servants expected to serve both ruling group and opposition group(s). Understanding the constitution, conventions and procedures is a key area of expertise for civil servants (Hartley and Manzie, 2020) and this pertains in other sectors too.

The fourth factor, also part of the context, is social norms, power distance and organizational and occupational cultures in organizations and sectors. Some public service organizations are very hierarchical, others less so. Some prize blunt speaking, others wrap up ideas in language a diplomat would be proud of. These and other social norms and practices pertain to particular services and sectors, but they also vary between organizations in the same service. These can affect how far political astuteness is seen as acceptable, whether certain behaviors conform with expectations or ruffle feathers – and much of this organizational context must be understood, analytically or intuitively, by the politically astute public leader. It takes time, networks and experience to develop the ‘savvy’ to “read people and situations” and to “build alignment and alliances”. One interesting finding from both the UK study (Hartley and Fletcher, 2008) and the Australia/New Zealand/UK study of public servants (Hartley et al, 2013) is that those who reported having worked in more than one sector in the economy (e.g. health and local government; defense and education) self-reported significantly higher political skills. This suggests that experience in different organizational structures, cultures and practices may sensitize a public servant to the existence of different interests, values and goals across varied stakeholders.

This section has outlined differences in the contexts, constraints and therefore the interpretations made of ‘political behavior’, and the impact of structures not just agency in political astuteness. However, what also comes across from research is that public leaders report that they tend to have their political antennae waving at all times (Hartley et al, 2015). This is not to say that they are behaving politically all the time but that they are politically aware in all or most work situations. In interviews, many said they found it difficult to think of times when they did not find political skills

useful. In the surveys they rated it as very or extremely valuable across a range of arenas (where ideas are contested and explored) and situations including working with ministers; working with influential people in your organization; working with local government; working with central government; thinking about how public opinion has an impact on their organization; working with partners and in strategic alliances (Hartley et al, 2013). These situations cover politicians and other stakeholders, internal as well as external interests. The skills may not be deployed behaviorally but leaders report a continual, scanning, reflecting awareness.

Is political astuteness ethical?

This chapter noted earlier that the key academic literatures about political behaviors in the workplace all have some degree of ambivalence about the value of this.

Whether political science, public administration/management or general management studies, there is a recognition that political astuteness can be devious, dastardly and self-interested – and it can be exercised to create constructive outcomes for organizations and society. As noted earlier, political behaviors are in part judged by those being influenced so attributional biases play a part. There will inevitably be a degree of ambiguity about motive.

Alford et al (2016) report that not only do public servants report using political astuteness skills in different phases of the policy cycle, but they also report that they find this legitimate, within particular constraints. Hartley and Manzie (2020) found that civil servants reported that their use of political astuteness in working with ministers was ethical. This could, of course, be a self-serving bias but in the interviews they spoke of dilemmas, mistakes they had made, and concerns that

preoccupied them at times, which indicated that they were trying to use their skills to ensure that public value (Benington and Moore, 2011) and not private value for a minister, group or self was created. This is not inevitable – there can be “knaves” among public servants (Le Grand, 2003) and several spoke of colleagues who had, in their view, crossed an ethical line into “too much” political astuteness, notably when working with ministers or when serving their own career to the detriment of public purpose. Hartley and Manzie (2020) present a model for assessing combining ethics with political astuteness, based on two dimensions: the extent to which a civil servant colludes with or is independent from a minister and the extent to which advice is technically brilliant but politically naïve or is politically astute but not grounded in professional expertise and knowledge. This model derives from empirical work of senior leaders working with ministers but it can be argued that this is also applicable to other situations where a public leader is working with powerful politicians in policy-making and action, and indeed perhaps with other powerful stakeholders. This is shown in Figure 5, as a fine balance between competing pressures.

Figure 5 about here

Alford et al (2016) concluded that political astuteness skills themselves help to keep a curiosity and reflectiveness about the varied and sometimes competing interests of diverse stakeholders so that an ethical stance could be taken. Given the dynamic nature of multiple interests and values in wicked problems and often in the context of networked governance, it is perhaps helpful that ethics are seen not solely as a code

of conduct but as the continual analysis and weighing up of different interests over the short and longer-term, with a key question about public value being created or destroyed at the forefront of the public leader's

CONCLUSIONS

Despite the ambivalence and contrasting views in various literatures, this chapter argues that political astuteness (also called having savvy, 'nous' or having political antennae) really does matter for leaders in public service. It matters for leadership because working with wicked problems and multiple stakeholders means that leaders have to find ways to take account of differences in values, goals and interests. Much of the classic leadership literature has tended to focus on a leader having compliant 'followers' which downplays or ignores diverse and sometimes competing interests (Hartley, 2017). Political astuteness also matters for public leaders in particular because public policy, strategy and services are often issues which are contested in society so being alert to these varied perspectives and working to construct a degree of shared purpose is often part of the job. Political astuteness also matters because some paid public leaders may have to work with politicians in government and opposition so they must find ways of dancing with politicians in a way which is politically astute but not party political. Research suggests that staying on the right side of the line or zone requires more not less political astuteness (Alford et al, 2016).

However, to be politically astute, it is helpful to have concepts and frameworks which help public leaders to understand politics in the workplace and the role of political astuteness in work. This chapter has used both theory and empirical evidence to

enhance this understanding. The chapter has teased out three different aspects of politics, showing that public leaders deal with informal (organizational and stakeholder) politics not only the formal politics of the state. In Westminster systems, they are expected to eschew party political politics. The empirical research shows that public leaders are mainly comfortable about informal politics, and recognize that it can be used for constructive public value purposes and is not automatically devious 'politicking', though that can co-exist in workplaces. The second key framework is that of political astuteness, which is viewed as a set of capabilities or, in shorthand, skills, which can be exercised by leaders. Hartley et al's (2013) five-dimensional framework of personal skills; interpersonal skills; reading people and situations; building alignment and alliances; and strategic direction and scanning provides an explicit and empirically researched approach to understanding leadership effectiveness in public organizations. Third, capabilities alone are not enough – there is a need to consider the job demands and the organizational and institutional context. Finally, a framework about ethics in working with politicians (a key stakeholder for many paid public leaders) could increase understanding and reflection about ethics which goes beyond a code of ethics or similar.

This chapter also reflects on the empirical evidence about political astuteness – that while most public leaders recognize its value and practice it on a daily basis, it is not that well practiced. The chapter shows that public leaders are modest about their political astuteness skills. Research has found a real hunger to try to improve these skills (Yates and Hartley, 2020).

Overall, this chapter has resonance with some other literature about the constructive aspects of political astuteness across all sectors (e.g. Buchanan, 2008; Butcher and Clarke, 2008) and particularly in the public sector (Rhodes, 2015; Baddeley and

James, 1987a; Hartley et al, 2015). While political astuteness may create dilemmas from time to time, so may the absence of political astuteness and an insistence on purely rational management.

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Figure 1:

Comparative analysis: Public servants
Australia, New Zealand, UK (n = 1012)

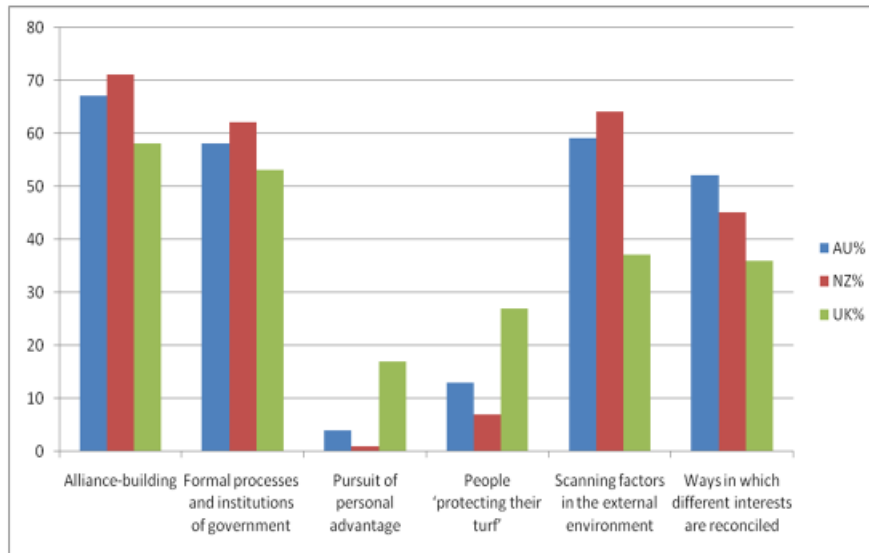
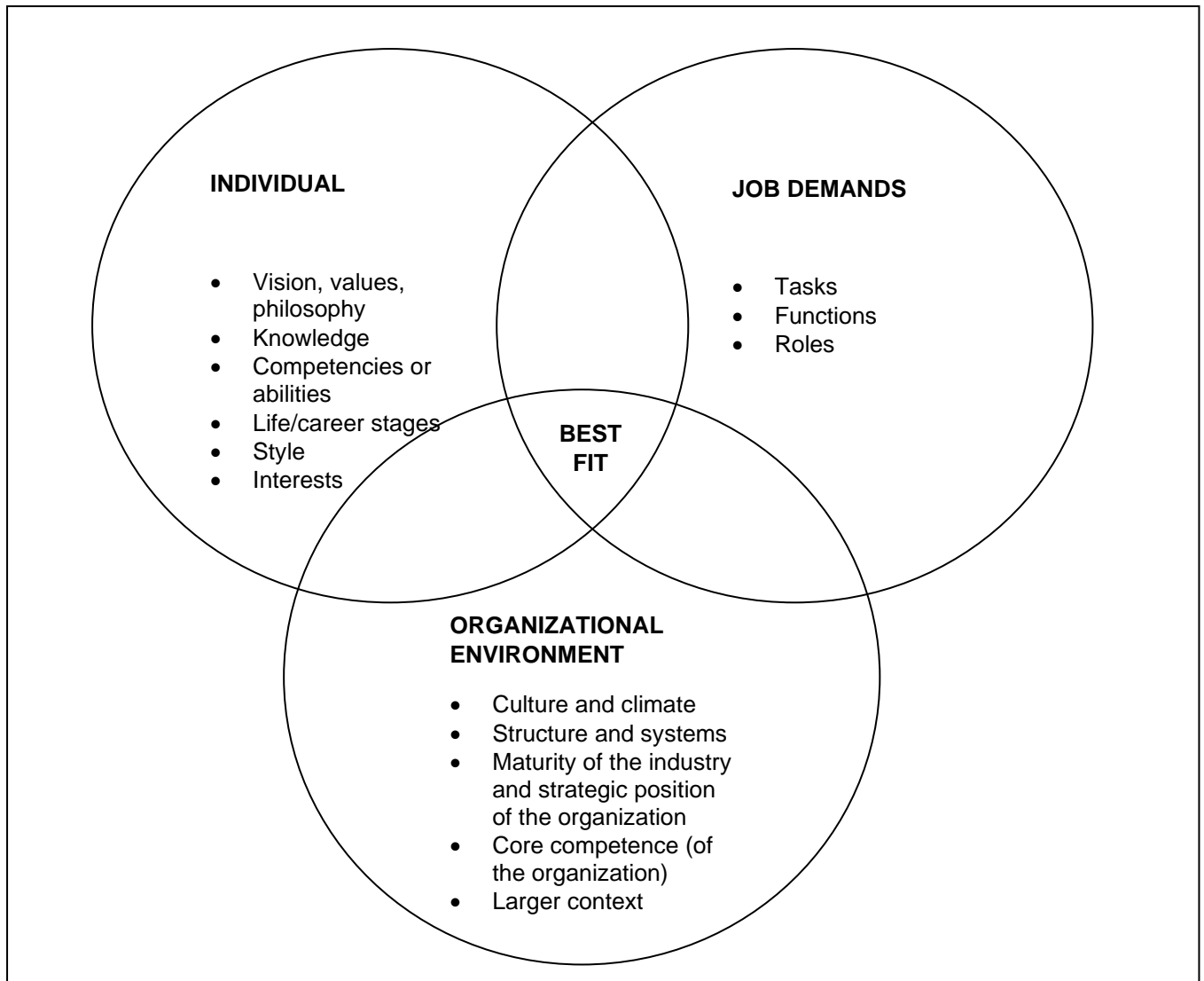


Figure 2: Boyatzis' theory of job action and performance



Source: Hartley and Benington (2010) adapted from Boyatzis, 2006, p. 122.

Figure 3:

Skills framework (Hartley and Fletcher, 2008)

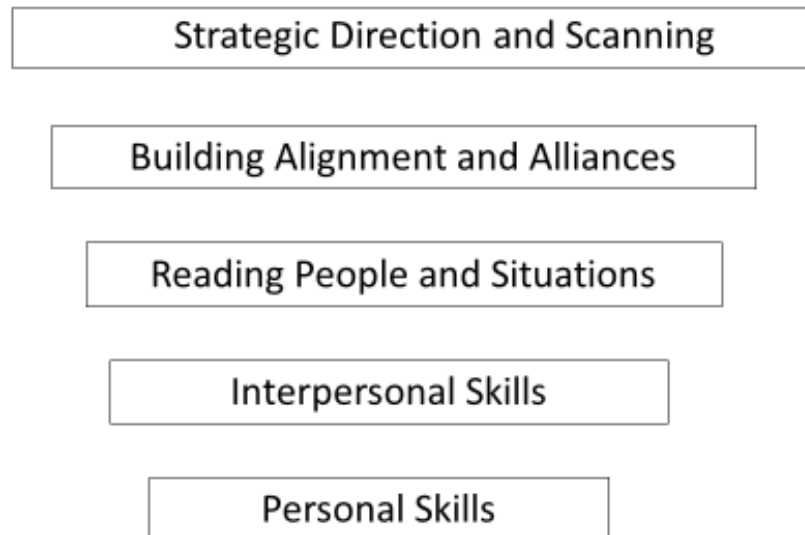


Figure 4: How public servants rated themselves and their superiors on political astuteness (on scale of 1-6)

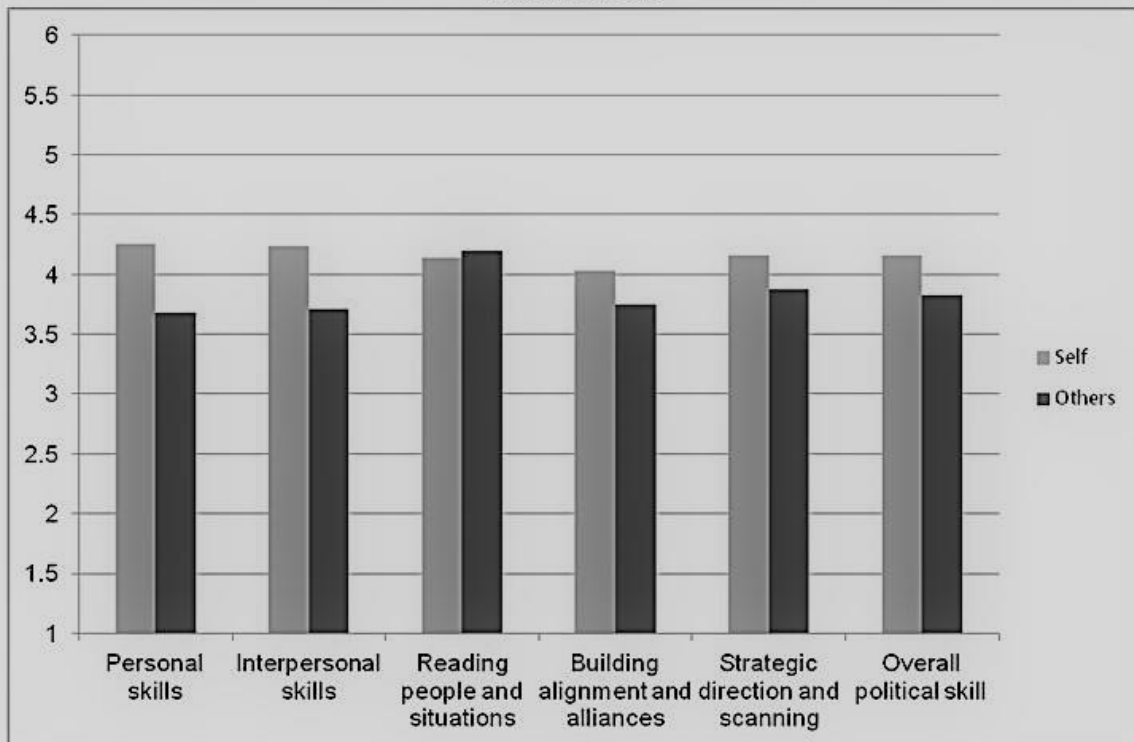
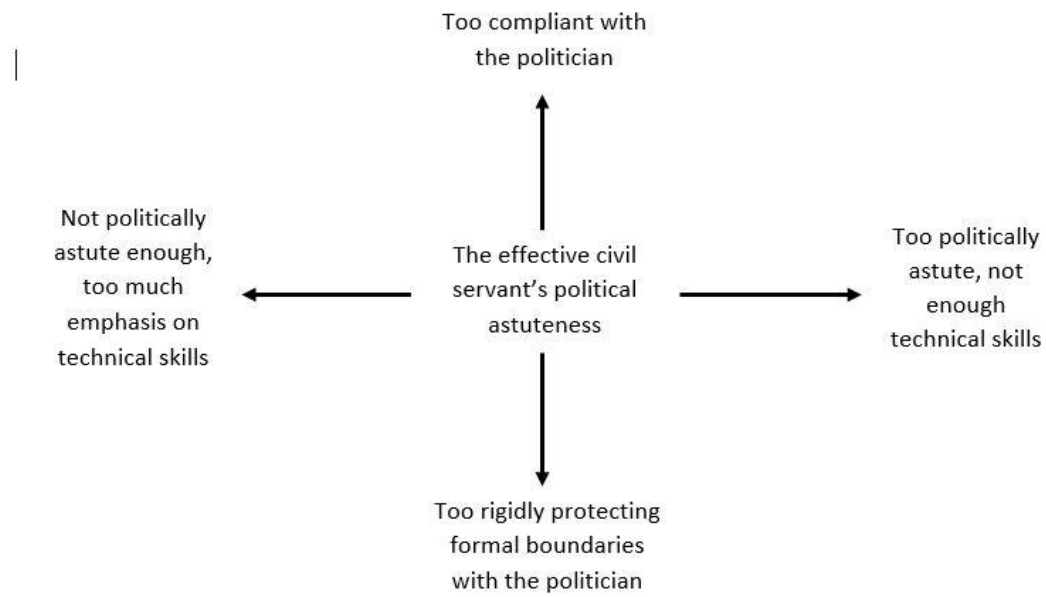


Figure 5: The fine balance of ethics



Source: Hartley and Manzie (2020)