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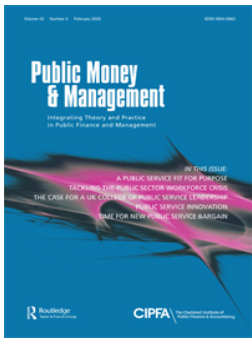
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Public aspects of public manager training, education and development

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IMPACT

This article will be of interest to those undergoing or responsible for management and leadership development in public organizations, in both policy and practice. Training providers such as consultancies, universities and colleges will also find the article useful. The article challenges the assumption that management capabilities are generic and context-free. The article argues that public organizations exist in a political system, not a market, and therefore senior public leaders and managers will benefit from systematic learning about democracy, public value and political astuteness in order to operate as professional, fair and impartial public servants.

ABSTRACT

Training, education and development for senior public managers often focuses on generic management capabilities, which are useful for any sector, but this neglects the specific features, purposes and processes of public organizations. This article identifies distinctive features of public management and argues that knowledge and practice about democracy, public value and political astuteness are key areas for management development. There are some services with good practice, but there is scope for wider design and provision of sector-specific training.

KEYWORDS

Capabilities; democracy; leadership development; management development; political astuteness; public value; skills; training

Introduction

In this article, I will argue that the attention to curriculum, methods and pedagogy for the capacity-building of senior public managers tends to focus on generic management skills but has downplayed, or even obscured, the need for such managers to learn about the specific context of the public sector and public services. This is an essay proposing key changes in senior manager training and development. I will reflect on what distinctive knowledge and capabilities (sometimes called 'skills') are important for public managers beyond those qualities needed to be a manager in general. In this article, therefore, I will discuss senior public servant development in the context of democracy, public value and the political astuteness required by public managers in order to promote the common good. This means improving not just the efficiency of public services but their effectiveness as public organizations, by serving the needs of society as a whole—not only the internal performance management demands of the organization. This article is therefore about exploring what it means to be a *public* manager and how management development can address that.

Before developing these arguments further, I define and clarify the terms used in this article:

- First, I will use the word 'training' to cover training, education and development (TED). These are different concepts with different implications for how knowledge, skills, abilities and judgement are acquired or enhanced, but I will stick with the word 'training' to avoid sentences becoming too clumsy and because this is sometimes the language of policy documents about TED. So training is the shorthand used here for a range of pedagogical approaches to improve the effectiveness of public servants.

- Second, I use the concept of capabilities, rather than skill, because cognitive, affective and behavioural qualities for public managers go well beyond skill to include judgement and knowledge, while recognizing that some policy documents refer to skills but meaning this wider array of capabilities.
- Third, the scope of this article covers senior employed public servants, whether working for government or public services. The focus is on managers in that most senior staff will have responsibilities for resources, plans and/or staff to advise on or implement policies and strategies for their organization or agency. Sometimes, such managers are called 'public leaders' because many will exercise leadership as well as management. Therefore, for the purposes of this article, I will use the terms 'manager' and 'leader' (and 'management' and 'leadership') interchangeably, recognizing that in the academic literature they can overlap in particular contexts (Yukl & Gardner, 2020).
- Finally, the scope of this article focuses on public services in the context of liberal democracies, with free and fair elections, universal suffrage, the rule of law and with elected politicians governing in part through representative democracy.

Generic or public management?

There have been many reports and research projects about the capabilities which senior public servants need in order to be effective. The OECD report on leadership for a high-performing civil service in all its member countries argued for a more systemic approach to leadership development in recognition of the increasing complexity of the challenges which society faces (Gerson, 2020). In the UK, a number of

reports from the House of Commons Select Committee on Public Administration and the Constitution (and its predecessor select committee) have explored how to develop an effective senior cadre of civil servants (for example PASC, 2015; PACAC, 2019). Reports on the same theme of senior public manager capabilities have been published in the USA, Australia, Canada and many other countries (for example Bice & Coates, 2021; McDonald et al., 2020).

There is often an argument put forward that the changing context requires new capabilities. The increasing recognition of ‘wicked’ problems (for example Head & Alford, 2015) and societal grand challenges (for example George et al., 2016)—where there are multiple interpretations of the issue let alone how to address it, and often requiring collaboration across organizational and sectoral boundaries—leads to the need for senior managers to think and act with an understanding of complex systems; to work in the context of polycentric governance for example; to partner with other organizations within and across sectors; and to co-design and co-produce in some contexts while continuing to act as lead or sole agent in other contexts.

However, in management development prospectuses and in some policy reports on the topic, analysis of the context often jumps directly from analysis of social and managerial challenges to offering managerial solutions of the generic managerial kind, for example the need for better financial management, or project management skills for civil servants, or improving the leadership of people, or managing change.

These are undoubtedly important capabilities, but there is a danger that they are stripped of their democratic and institutional context and therefore treated solely as generic managerial capabilities without regard for sector or for the purposes of the service or organization. One sees in training materials the assumption that it does not matter, for a manager, which sector they work in—private, public, third sector or in hybrid or partnership arrangements—because the capabilities are assumed to be identical and can be applied with equal expertise.

There may be several reasons why this assumption about generic management pervades many aspects of public management. First, there is the continuing influence of ‘new’ public management. It is not so new now and it has been robustly critiqued (for example Hood & Peters, 2004) but its premise that public management should imitate private sector management in order to create efficiencies and effectiveness for government and public services is still found in areas such as performance management, procurement, creating agency structures, project management and HR management. Second, some academic scholarship has augmented this bias, on the assumption that the private firm operating in a market economy is the norm which underpins management theory and practices. Rainey (2009) commented that ‘many organization theorists have paid so little attention to a distinction between public and private organizations that any controversy over the matter remains quiet in most major journals’ (p. 50). Third, the efforts of professional bodies in management to gain recognition for management skills, knowledge and other capabilities may have resulted in the downplaying of sectoral and institutional differences. Whatever the causes, the key issue

to note is that many senior public servant development programmes and curricula tend to focus largely or exclusively on generic leadership and management capabilities.

However, sectoral differences can be important in some contexts and this can influence how leadership and management is, or should be, exercised. As illustration, consider Rainey’s (2009) thought experiment: ‘If there is no real difference between public and private organizations, can we nationalise all industrial forms, or privatize all government agencies?’ (p. 66). Despite areas of overlap across sectors and large variation within sectors, there can be significant differences between sectors that make understanding and acting on those differences important. Allison (1986) provides a valuable reminder that the public and private sectors are ‘alike in all *unimportant* respects’ (my emphasis).

Public purpose, politics and public management

While recognizing that there are large variations in the ways in which publicness is expressed organizationally, there are several distinctive features of public organizations which ought to have implications for training, education and development. Christensen et al. (2020) explore these features in some detail noting that public organizations are part of a society’s political system, with organizations covering particular territories (nations, states, regions and local authorities for example) or particular policy areas (education, environment and such) and that they can apply mandatory powers over citizens in relation to those territories or policy areas. As they are linked to the democratic political system, they involve multiple actors and their organizational purpose is to understand, to articulate and to address public and societal needs. Their location within democratic institutions and systems means that public organizations are major political actors in society and do not operate only as organizations providing services in an apolitical way. Public organizations, note Christensen et al., are not organized with the primary aim of operating within (supposedly free and) competitive economic markets. Given that public organizations do not choose their markets (as private organizations can do), and therefore their ‘customers’, they are obliged to work with whoever is eligible or relevant for that public service (though the scope of obligation may be decided by political acts, legislation, regulation or policy). An illustration of this occurs in law enforcement where police organizations have to interact with not only victims but also survivors, witnesses, criminals, community members and taxpayers as their stakeholders. A customer focus is insufficient. This is true of a range of public organizations.

Furthermore, in democratic societies, public organizations have political leaders, directly or indirectly elected through the votes of citizens, and who may be legitimately influenced by those citizens. Given that public organizations are linked to and part of the political system of a society, they tend to be multi-functional, providing not only services and/or infrastructure but also trying to ensure that outputs and outcomes are fair, accountable and keep people safe (Christensen et al., 2020). They have additional goals concerned with control, representation, participation

and equity. They are expected to be open and transparent where possible, in line with public accountability.

The existence of multiple goals means that different strategies and priorities are inevitably sometimes in tension (Christensen et al., 2020; Bason, 2018). Politics, both formal and informal, is a key means by which different interests in society can be reconciled in ways which enable social action. Contest and conflict lie at the heart of many public organizations because of so many divergent interests and stakeholders. Public organizations aim to create value for society or achieve the common good (Reich, 2018), which is often conceptualised as public value (Benington & Moore, 2011). Public organizations can create private value for individuals (for example a patient benefitting from a public hospital service) or private firms (for example grants for business development) but their overarching aim is to create a better society and benefits to the public through economic, social, ecological and other means. Public value is dynamic and may change over time, as stakeholders change, or as policy impacts become clearer, as evidence accumulates or as society itself changes (Benington & Hartley, 2024).

Public organizations are also characterised by being located in a constitutional context (written or otherwise) and bound by laws, regulations and conventions. Laws and regulation also affect the private and third sectors—though often in a less tightly bound way.

This consideration of the institutional context generates two interesting questions, not the focus of this article, but of tangential interest. First, if the distinctiveness of the public sector organizations is known, why does the training of senior public servants not sufficiently reflect this distinctiveness? Second, are those private sector providers of public servant training sufficiently aware of, and drawing on the distinctiveness of, the public sector? In the UK at least, there is considerable procurement of training from private sector providers, so these questions are particularly relevant. Awareness of sectoral differences is also important where public servants procure services from the private sector (to avoid unrealistic contracts for example) or where they are working in partnership or other joint arrangements.

Turning back to the main theme of this article, if senior public managers are to benefit from training which reflects the distinctiveness of public organizations as well as generic management capabilities, then what should be included in the curriculum for public managers? There will always be some technical capabilities needed for particular roles (for example environmental health managers need different specialist capabilities from adult services directors) but what ought to be common in the curriculum for senior managers. In this article, I suggest three areas for expanding the curriculum:

- Knowledge about democracy and the capabilities to locate management in a democratic system.
- Knowledge and other capabilities about how to discern and achieve public value.
- The development of leadership with political astuteness.

Knowledge about democracy

It is perhaps surprising that public servants do not appear to be exposed to much knowledge, discussion or application of

ideas about democracy. In the UK, some civil servants may get a little training in how parliament works but parliament is only one element of the UK democratic system and the focus seems to be more procedural than institutional (for example bill drafting). As illustration of this, Government Campus, which is intended to transform learning across the civil service, describes five strands of learning on its website (<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/the-government-campus-curriculum>) but only one strand is about working in government and that is about the processes of working in parliament, with some minor content about devolution. The core knowledge for civil servants, as described on the website, is generic—about inclusion, data management and health and safety, while the key skills (capabilities) are also generic—about project management, financial management and commercial awareness.

Why is democracy not more prominent in this particular curriculum? What about the wider governmental context, including local government? Where are other stakeholders and how to work with them in a fair and clear way? Where is any discussion of the public? Where is the consideration of different democratic systems (both within the UK and across countries globally). Why is the curriculum so focused on the UK's central government?

While I have used the Government Campus website to illustrate these matters, the absence of curriculum about democracy and how it functions (and where it is at risk) and the role of leadership and management within it seems to be absent in many (though not all, as we shall see) public servant training settings.

One exception is the new local government chief executive development programme 2023/24 by the Local Government Association jointly with the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives. That curriculum includes the need to 'understand the electoral basis of democratic legitimacy and community engagement' in a module about 'politics and the political interface' (Local Government Association, 2023).

Surely other services might follow local government's lead, being upfront about the democratic basis of public service in training, education and development because democracy and its systems and processes cannot be taken for granted. There is increasing recognition that democracy is inherently fragile and can be undermined in myriad ways. Evidence of this is particularly clear in the USA in recent years, but also in certain European countries, as well as in the UK with the fraying of democratic norms and guide-rails. Political scientists Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018), in their book *How democracies die*, show in historical detail how democracies can slide gradually, as well as suddenly, away from democracy into authoritarian uses of power, through the undermining not only of the rule of law but also the norms and conventions (the guide-rails) which support democracy.

It is therefore important that senior public managers understand the key aspects of democracy so that they can work in a professional and ethical way. Their training should reflect this. Knowledge and ability is needed to be able to stand up to politicians where necessary in support of proper democratic procedures, to advise politicians appropriately on constitutional matters, and to mentor and coach colleagues and subordinates so that they can understand and act in ways which are legitimate and

constitutional. In the UK, there are some excellent recent examples of courageous public servants standing up to politicians who were putting undue pressure on them to act in ways which were unconstitutional or which compromised impartial action (though there are also examples of where this has not happened). But should public managers have to learn by osmosis how to stand up for democratic principles and processes, if it is not included in public servant training? Is trial and error the best approach to trying to sustain a democratic society? Surely our democracy is too important for that.

There is perhaps a nervousness about talking about democracy in the UK (Flinders, 2010), particularly in the context of public servants. As a society we may have grown accustomed, complacent even, about the UK being an inherently democratic society and having ‘the mother of parliaments’. However, democracy can thrive or fail not only through the actions and inactions of politicians but also those of senior civil servants. Some of that nervousness may be due, in the UK, to civil servants working in a Westminster system of government, which includes the idea that permanent civil servants are expected to work for the government of the day and to remain impartial and distant from party politics. Local government officials of course work for the whole council which brings a wider perspective but where understanding party politics can still be fraught on occasions. Police officers are expected to work with operational independence from elected politicians. These are different positionings but they all have to work at the political interface. However, currently, being a public manager has tended to emphasise the technical over the political aspects of senior jobs—in training and also in the academic literature.

Yet public management is inherently political due to the nature of government and public services with their multiple publics and stakeholders (for example Christensen et al., 2020; Jenkins & Gray, 1983). So, instead of making the assumption of a sharp and clear line between politicians doing politics and policy on the one hand and public managers implementing those policies (the so-called ‘politics–administration dichotomy’—Svara, 2001) in Westminster systems, other approaches can be recognized, debated and evaluated. The separation of political work from administrative work has strong normative force (Hughes, 2017) but has also been called a ‘a useful fiction’ (Peters, 2001, p. 82), based as it is on an outmoded view of public managers as ‘administrators’ dealing with simple technical problems. Alternative views are gaining momentum. Many senior public servants are leaders in their own right (of staff, of organizations, of some stakeholders). Also, the increasing presence of ‘wicked’ issues (Head & Alford, 2015; Rittel & Webber, 1973) makes a simple distinction between decision and execution unrealistic. Alford et al. (2017) suggest that there is sometimes a line but also sometimes a zone between politician and senior public servant (a space where both may contribute according to their expertise, inclination, task in hand and context), reflecting different services, contexts, issues and leadership qualities of the politician and that the space is more a negotiated order than rigidly defined roles. If the empirical reality is sometimes blurred with shared boundaries (as reported in many studies), then it is crucial that public managers have the capabilities to discern,

analyse and enact when they are in a zone and when a line must be maintained.

It is critical in Westminster systems of government that public managers remain party politically neutral and offer impartial advice. However, this does not mean that training should eschew the understandings, debates and controversies about democracy and the existence of different democratic traditions and practices. Without this base, public servants could be stumbling in the dark, learning solely through practice, and being unaware of the evidence base which might help them.

In order to support effective training, there are two further areas of curriculum that senior public leaders and managers would benefit from being exposed to, so I turn to those matters now.

Knowledge and practice about public value

In the academic arena, there has been considerable interest in public value in recent years (Benington & Moore, 2011; O’Flynn, 2021; Hartley et al., 2017). The concept of public value was first outlined by Moore (1995) and was then built on by Benington (2011). Benington argues that public value has two dimensions—what the public value as their priorities and preferences, and what adds value to the public sphere. These different dimensions of public value can align or can be in tension in different contexts. He also notes that public value is a contested democratic practice (Benington, 2015), in part because different stakeholders may have different values that they attach to the processes, outputs and outcomes from public and other organizations. Dialogue and debate may be needed to create sufficient consensus to enable action to be taken, under the overall direction of elected representatives.

Public value is an important concept for senior public managers for a number of reasons. First, public value overlaps with but is distinct from the common good. The latter implies a unitarist view of society with full consensus about outputs and outcomes whereas public value recognizes that there may be many publics in a pluralist society, with sometimes consensual values and interests but at other times with divergent and sometimes competing values and interests. Second, the existence—or creation—of multiple publics is treated in public value theory as socially constructed rather than as a given. Consequently, understanding different publics and how to engage with them is a key knowledge and capability for many senior public servants. Third, the dimension of ‘what adds value to the public sphere’ keeps a focus not just on organizational performance measures but on what creates a better society—for example, safe, peaceful, just, socially and economically prosperous. Benington (2011) explains that public value is not just about economic value but may also include use value and social, political and ecological value. The attention to the public sphere means that consideration should be given to future generations not solely the values and preferences of current citizens. Bason (2018) notes that outcomes through innovation by public organizations needs to be assessed by a range of indicators which include creating democratic value as well as efficiency and effectiveness value. A public value perspective helps to avoid a single-minded focus on ‘customers’ rather than on a wider range of stakeholders of

a public service, who may be taxpayers, victims or beneficiaries. Finally, a public value perspective helps to focus on outcomes for society rather than simply majoritarian views about what is valuable.

The increasing interest in the neo-Weberian state (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004) with its focus on maintaining a strong bureaucracy with impartial and merit-based office holding and action but combined with an entrepreneurial spirit of focus on achieving fair and effective outcomes provides a further rationale for interest in public value. A neo-Weberian state emphasises not market relations as the primary driver of action and effectiveness but the creation of a professional culture of quality and service (Ongaro, 2024).

These different aspects of public value in ethical, managerial and practical terms are not always easy to navigate. It can be challenging to discern what is public value in some complex and ‘wicked’ situations—let alone work to achieve a degree of consensus and also to find the ways to achieve public value. Public value can be lost, wasted and displaced as well as created (Benington, 2011; Hartley et al., 2019; Esposito & Ricci, 2015).

How far is public value currently present in the training and education of senior public servants? A public value perspective could provide an important counterweight to the emphasis on ‘commercial understanding’ which features so prominently on the Government Campus website.

However, is there sufficient attention to helping senior public managers discern and create public value? For example, the programme of courses as well as the evaluation approach for the Government Campus does not mention public value, or public interest or related concepts (broadly defined) of the common good. (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/64a6c203c531eb000c64ffc9/2023_Evaluation_Strategy_-_full_version-design_v5_6.07.23.pdf). There is plenty of discussion of processes outputs and impacts but this is not expressed in terms of public value. Yet the Barber report (2017) on creating a public value framework for government includes a recommendation to deploy public value concepts.

There are some good examples in management development. Academi Wales includes sessions on public value in its leadership programmes for Welsh public leaders (<https://academiwales.gov.wales>). Public value is often part of the syllabus for master’s courses in public administration in the UK and USA. Can more trainers follow their lead?

If public value is so important to government and public services, for the reasons explained above, then one might expect to see public value in the course descriptions for the training programmes for public servants. The fact that commercial awareness and understanding is often in top-level descriptions of courses, but that public value or associated terms is absent, suggests a need for rebalancing if senior training is to be in public management rather than solely in a contextual generic management.

Political astuteness for public managers

Turning to the third area of a curriculum specifically for public managers, there is increasing recognition that senior public leaders and managers need to acquire capabilities of political astuteness in order to be effective in their work. Political astuteness has been shown to be associated with more effective leadership across all sectors (Doldor, 2017)

so in some ways it is surprising that this topic is not covered under generic management capabilities. It is, I argue, doubly important for public managers as it has particular resonance and meaning for public organizations, operating as they do in a political and societal context. In fact, senior public managers report that political astuteness helps them be more effective in their work (Hartley et al., 2015; Baddeley & James, 1987; Hartley & Manzie, 2020) across a range of stakeholders covering both formal and informal politics, including working with elected politicians in an effective, professional and ethical way. Waring et al. (2022) found that political astuteness was a key and constructive leadership set of practices for senior managers in the NHS.

In Westminster systems of government, public servants are expected to remain party politically neutral, providing impartial advice and action either to the government of the day (for example civil servants) or to the council as a whole (for example local government officers). However, their work, by the nature of being located in public organizations, is likely to be the subject of wide formal and informal political debate, contestation and controversy, either regularly or on occasions. Some senior public servants work closely, even daily, with elected politicians in their roles as permanent secretaries or as chief executives of local councils or chief constables of police forces. At other levels in the hierarchy, public servants may have to interact with elected politicians. They also need to be astute about the informal politics which exists within and around all organizations—the various interests, motivations, values and goals pursued by different factions internally and by different organizational partners and contractors and by different lobby, advocacy and other civil society groups. Public servants cannot avoid politics—it is the water they swim in. So learning how to distinguish between, navigate and sometimes avoid informal politics, formal politics and political party politics is surely critical to the work of senior public servants and deserves attention in training.

Some academics and practitioners have recognized this. The capabilities include knowledge, skills and judgement and are sometimes called ‘political astuteness’, but may also be called ‘political nous’, ‘political savvy’, ‘political awareness’, ‘socio-political intelligence’, ‘political acumen’ or ‘having political antennae’. They amount to understanding and working with diverse and competing interests in ways to create constructive outcomes for society (i.e. creating public value). Research by Hartley et al. (2015) based on large-scale surveys and interviews across all public services in the UK, Australia and New Zealand found that capabilities could be identified along five dimensions: personal skills; inter-personal skills; reading people and situations; building alignment and alliances; and strategic direction and scanning.

In the past, political capabilities exercised by managers were considered to be highly problematic as they were assumed to be secretive, dysfunctional and illegitimate—so-called ‘Machiavellian’ behaviours and ‘politicking’. However, more recent work has shown that many, or even most, managers (particularly at more senior levels) value having political capabilities and that they can be exercised ethically in ways to achieve organizational outcomes. The dark side of politics (self-serving, partisan) can still exist but many

managers appreciate and use the constructive side as well (Buchanan, 2008). Technical managerial knowledge and skills are still very important so political astuteness is an additional set of capabilities not a substitute (Manzie & Hartley, 2013). One senior civil servant said of political astuteness: 'It's every breath we take here' and this was explored further in an article for *Public Money & Management* (Hartley & Manzie, 2020). Rhodes (2016) argued for the need for craft skills for public managers including stewardship, prudence, probity, judgement, diplomacy and political nous.

Given the need for impartiality, the exercise of political astuteness is recognized by senior public servants to be party-politically neutral (Hartley & Manzie, 2020). Research shows that political astuteness is not exercised lightly by senior public managers but often with a great deal of reflection and analysis (Alford et al., 2017) and with particular attention to ethical behaviour (Hartley & Manzie, 2020). Furthermore, political astuteness also helps public managers to stay on the appropriate side of the line or zone of work with elected politicians according to Alford et al. (2017). In other words, political astuteness helps, rather than hinders, impartiality and professional action.

The recognition of the value of political astuteness does not just come from the academic literature but from some governments and public services. Gerson (2020), reviewing the capabilities needed for high-performing public leadership across OECD countries, advocates for the acquisition of political astuteness. In the UK, select committee reports (PACAC, 2019; PASC, 2015) have highlighted the value of senior civil servants having political astuteness and have argued for including these capabilities in training and development. However, it is not clear that this has happened, and later select committee reports appear to be somewhat frustrated by lack of progress in this sphere.

However, some countries have grasped the need for political astuteness and have incorporated it into senior leader training and development. New Zealand's Public Service Act of 2020 notes the need for political astuteness in public servants in order to work with elected politicians and to work with diverse organizations and stakeholders. Their leadership development framework includes political astuteness as 'an essential competency'. In neighbouring Australia, the Woolcott Report (2018) notes that 'It is imperative that the APS [Australian Public Service] remains impartial and apolitical. However, the APS also needs to be politically astute'. The Queensland government has added political astuteness to the key capabilities for senior public servants and across the Australian states and federal government many job adverts for senior public servants include political astuteness capabilities in their person specification.

In the UK, a number of public services have recognized the value of political astuteness and included it in their competency frameworks or training programmes. For example, the College of Policing regularly includes sessions on leadership with political astuteness in its Executive Leadership Programme (for those moving into strategic command roles) and in its programme for fast-track leaders (for middle-ranking police officers). It also worked with the National Police Wellbeing Service to include political astuteness (including self-assessment) in the pioneering

course for superintendent level ranks about applied leadership for data and technology (in part because of the recognition of wicked problems in relation to data and technology and in part because of the need to undertake intelligent commissioning of private contractors). The local government chief executive programme, noted earlier, also includes self-assessment and training on political astuteness.

A decade ago, the NHS included political astuteness as part of its competency framework and education for leaders at all levels but the current competency framework for the national graduate management trainee scheme focuses on generic management competencies and does not include political astuteness in the outline of the programme (despite the demonstrated importance for clinical and managerial leaders, see Waring et al., 2022). Some fire services (for example Leicestershire) include under the competency 'persuading and influencing' for the assistant chief fire officer that they should be able to make 'effective use of political processes to influence and persuade others'.

It is pleasing to see these developments, based on recognition of the complex contexts, the varied stakeholders and the contested issues which senior public often have to deal with. However, these current offerings in the UK tend to be scattered in isolated contributions across some but not all government and public services. There is not systematic coverage across public services. Given that generic managerial capabilities are insufficient, given that political astuteness capabilities can be taught (Yates & Hartley, 2021) and can be used to discern and create public value, why is not more provision made for developing these capabilities?

Ways of learning

I have concentrated in this article on examining areas of curriculum for senior managers which stem from the fact that public organizations operate in a political system rather than a market. Can this be taken for granted? Perhaps senior managers can swim in such democratic contexts without needing explicit content or sessions about politics and its manifestations in democracy, public value and leadership with political astuteness. After all, it is well known that informal learning constitutes a major element in the acquisition of managerial knowledge and capabilities (Gold & Mumford, 2010). I argue here, as do Gold and Mumford, that this may be necessary but is not sufficient. Currently, some learning on these matters is taking place through the telling of war stories, i.e. bringing in experienced colleagues who have faced crises or challenges and going step-by-step through their thinking and action, often in closed sessions for that set of professionals. Informal learning in small groups occurs, we know, when colleagues gather over coffee to chew over the dilemmas they are facing, or to more formally debrief where plans did not go as expected. Colleagues may talk to a trusted confidante to explore a sensitive problem. These all have their place in the development of senior public servants, but surely we can do better than keeping such important learning to the margins of the main curriculum?

While learning through experience and through sharing that experience is very important, there is also a need for systematic learning drawing on theory, concepts,

frameworks and evidence alongside practical learning. One of the criteria for being a profession is having a body of knowledge based on systematic research, theory and evidence. And management development experts point to the need to include both formal and informal learning together, blended in particular ways, in order to develop competent managers (for example Gold & Mumford, 2010).

This is recognized in the world of practice too. A series of reports from the UK Select Committee on public administration in 2015, 2017, 2018, and 2019 all emphasised the need for systematic learning (for example PACAC, 2019; PASC, 2015). These observations point to the need for academic theory and research evidence not just war stories and tales round the water cooler. There has been interest in many professions in evidence-based practice (for example Briner, 2018) so why are government and some public services not drawing more on conceptual learning and exploring the quality and range of evidence for particular practices. An effective curriculum should include sound evidence (and awareness of where the evidence is weak). It should draw on strong theory where it is available (and there is high-quality theory and evidence from a range of sources for the domains of democracy, public value and political astuteness). Public servants will benefit from having useful frameworks explaining and analysing phenomena rather than a tangle of half-remembered stories and advice from colleagues, some of which may be given with confidence but be unevidenced. Blending theory and practice can be particularly effective, particularly for practising managers, so theory, evidence and frameworks should be embedded clearly and confidently in the curriculum, not tucked around the edges in half-whispers.

Leaving discussions about complex, sensitive, contested and sometimes high profile matters in the half-light in training contexts does not serve individuals, their organizations or society well. Furthermore, it is a risky strategy. For example, senior and aspiring senior managers report that they learnt political astuteness in a haphazard and often painful way (Yates & Hartley, 2021), through making mistakes or through trial and error. Learning through making mistakes can be costly to the individual and their career and also costly to the public service and sometimes critically to citizens and communities. Surely government and public services can do better than this?

Conclusions

This article has outlined the argument and provided evidence, from a range of illustrative sources, for the proposition that too much senior public service training, development and education has neglected the concept of public in the phrase public manager. There has been an emphasis on generic managerial capabilities, which are important but so, too, are the capabilities for leading and managing in specific contexts. It is time to bring to make explicit and provide learning for key concepts which are important specifically for public management.

The three areas I have focused on for the training, development and education of senior public managers all stem from the role of politics in liberal democracies. Public organizations operate in a political system—not in a market. There is therefore a need for each of the knowledge and practice areas of democracy, public value

and political astuteness in the content of training courses and opportunities for public managers. And covered both informally and with systematic evidence.

So a renewed approach to leadership and management for senior public servants will benefit from paying attention to the capabilities for managing public purposes—whether in public organizations or through contracting with other sectors. If only generic management capabilities are developed, then the particular ones needed in public organizations will either be overlooked or will lose out to values and practices more concerned with making profits in competitive markets. Democracy is currently quite fragile so it is very timely to explore these matters.

At a time when democracy is fraying and under attack, and where many public services, at least in the UK, have been privatized (and thereby brought under commercial rather than public institutional logics and goals) and many public services have been and are being commodified (Corcoran & Albertson, 2023; Gray et al., 2023) in ways which reduce public value (think water companies in the UK), we need to make explicit the specific purposes and processes of public organizations and design training, education and development accordingly. At a time when the world globally faces many challenges of war, climate change and more, then government and public services, aided by training providers, universities and colleges need to rediscover and revalue the public elements of public management. There is a need to surface rather than conceal or push to the side the important features which are distinctive about public organizations and their purposes, and to properly reflect that in training, development and education for senior public managers. They are *public* managers and not, simply, managers.

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