

A. Carol Rusaw
University of Northern Virginia

Administrative Leadership in the Public Sector

Montgomery Van Wart and Lisa A. Dicke, eds., *Administrative Leadership in the Public Sector* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2008). 449 pp. \$89.95 (cloth), ISBN: 9780765613486; \$34.95 (paper), ISBN: 9780765613493.

Leadership, particularly in public administration, is an illusive concept. Often based on private sector management and leadership theories and practice, it has been underresearched as a practice and in theory. In existing studies of leadership in private and public organizational contexts, writers have defined leadership in three general camps: as a set of exemplary traits, values, and behaviors that individuals possess; the ability to influence action and motivation based on situational contexts and follower characteristics; and ascription among followers. Much of the scholarship has focused on individuals in charge of for-profit firms rather than in government. In the public sector, studies have centered on elected representatives and heads of organizations. *Administrative Leadership in the Public Sector* differs from the existing Leadership, particularly in public administration, is an illusive concept. Often based on private sector management and leadership theories and practice, it has been underresearched as a practice and in theory. In existing studies of leadership in private and public organizational contexts, writers have defined leadership in three general camps: as a set of exemplary traits, values, and behaviors that individuals possess; the ability to influence action and motivation based on situational contexts and follower characteristics; and ascription among followers. Much of the scholarship has focused on individuals in charge of for-profit firms rather than in government. In the public sector, studies have centered on elected representatives and heads of organizations. *Administrative Leadership in*

the Public Sector differs from the existing literature in its emphasis on leadership as influencing change at both the individual and organizational levels. The focus differs as well. Leaders are career public servants, for the most part, who may initiate and carry out the roles and responsibilities of leadership at multiple agency echelons. The authors identify these leaders as having personal characteristics and competencies that enable them to create and sustain interpersonal and organizational transformation from their knowledge and experiences within the public sector.

Editors Montgomery Van Wart and Lisa Dicke point out that the principles of scientific management have limited the conceptualization of leadership to a set of proscriptions for “best” ways. The legacies of Frederick Winslow Taylor and Henri Fayol have created a notion that there is little difference between public and private sector management. Elected leaders as well as corporate executives have tried to put these principles into practice by emphasizing productivity in terms of organizational inputs and outputs. The system of checks and balances among the branches of government, which implies that no one branch has sufficient power and authority to develop and implement goals and strategies, however, negates the use of a single source of planning, goal setting, and resource allocation. The editors rightly note that, for public sector leadership, the “best” principles are more in line with best styles, techniques, and practices in individual situations.

As an ASPA Classics volume, the book sets a foundation by identifying several generic leadership theories and concepts in Van Wart’s “Public-Sector Leadership Theory” (chapter 2). In the main, however, most of the chapters adapt or build theoretical frameworks

A. Carol Rusaw is a professor and chair of the Education Department at the University of Northern Virginia. Previously, she taught public administration at the University of Connecticut, interpersonal and organizational communication at the University of Louisiana–Lafayette, and adult education and institutional research at North Dakota State University. In addition, she was a management and organizational development specialist with the federal government for 10 years.
E-mail: acrusaw@worldnet.att.net

that are based on public management practice. The first part of the book provides a foundational description of contemporary views of leadership, including situational, ethical, transformational, and integrative approaches. Matthew Fairholm's "Different Perspectives on the Practice of Leadership" gives a distinctive public sector adaptation of these theories. Fairholm integrates personal leadership qualities with situational and behavioral characteristics to create a perspective theory of leadership. His leadership perspectives model includes spiritual, cultural, and values-based orientations with respect to follower relationships and tools and behaviors for implementing change. He also gives recommendations on how to use the model in public administration.

Part II adapts generic theory to public settings, and the editors' encourage administrative leaders to undertake assessments of task, role, resources, and follower relationships. This part opens with Paul Appleby's (1946) case study description of how an administrator incorporated assessments in developing and carrying out an organizing strategy. Subsequent chapters in this part describe ways that administrative leaders can use their assessments to achieve high performance among individuals and within organizations as a whole. Examples include adapting total quality management to government and managing and evaluating service performance.

The third section follows with a discussion of conditions that public leaders need to assess, such as organizational mission, size, and complexity. This section is particularly apt for public administrators because it describes tensions that are likely to confront administrative leaders, particularly in their interactions with a wide variety of stakeholders with different and often conflicting interests, goals, and levels of political influence. The chapter authors show how assessing context, situations, and stakeholders influenced goals, decision making, assuming responsibility and accountability, balancing entrepreneurship with democratic values and practices, and policy leadership.

The pragmatic formulation of leadership styles and strategies is evident; of the remaining six parts of the book, four are concerned with practical ways that leaders can develop skills, abilities, and competencies for defining and performing their roles. These four parts incorporate an array of models of leadership traits, styles, techniques, and examples. Part IV, on best traits and skills for public leaders, is a compilation of personal characteristics that characterize administrative leaders: a high achievement motivation, skills in technical, interpersonal, and intellectual functioning, and 10 exemplary personal traits. Part VI relates competencies public leaders need to manage others, organizational roles and functions, and technical and organizational changes.

The last section of the book relates back to the "great men" of leadership theory, but within a public sector setting. The editors define greatness through accounts of values, beliefs, and the actions of noteworthy public leaders. Their definition of a "good" administrative leader on page 399 combines a moral sense of action with competent use of resources; in effect, an exemplary administrative manager promotes a "deft, efficient technical production, firm and compassionate utilization of human resources, a clear sensibility of what an organization needs to be doing and how it needs to adapt, and a sense of integrity that overlays it." The editors illuminate their description in the section's three chapters, the first of two parts relating to ethical and moral leader traits and behaviors. The remaining chapter exemplifies these characteristics in an account of Branch Rickey's courage in promoting racial integration in baseball.

The book provides a fairly clear portrait of the administrative leader in terms of the context of public administration. The image emerges from applications of leadership theory and praxis. The administrative leader is one who displays a subdued heroism and a willingness to assess difficult and changing conditions, identify action options, craft the best strategy based on available information, and take on levels of risk for the promotion of greater public or national causes. The administrative leader is drawn from theory, but has substance from the field of practice.

The varying areas of practice within public administration, however, make teaching effective administrative leadership skills and competencies difficult. The editors explain that the problem is worsened by the limitations of training-related organizations themselves. One major problem, the editors note, is the failure of training units to conduct holistic needs assessments and measure performance-based outcomes. In light of this, the book describes the adaptation of the Office of Personnel Management's competency-based approach, which specifies skills for each level of leadership responsibilities. The book also offers some practical advice for developing a succession management program and for evaluating executive performance.

Van Wart and Dicke maintain that a cornerstone of administrative leadership is the transformation of individuals and organizations. They point out the need for administrative leaders to orchestrate change, but transformation, particularly of large systems changes, gets relatively little emphasis. Chapters by Rudolph Garrity and Matthew Fairholm highlight public sector adaptations of transformational leadership models, but aside from a discussion of total quality management, the book provides scant guidance on how to implement such changes. Learning how to conceive of change in government organizations, planning and

implementing change strategies, and assessing and measuring outcomes are vital features of the transformative role that leaders play. Creating conditions for a healthy work climate, higher levels of human productivity, and streamlined work processes for greater organizational performance are areas that administrative leaders need to master. In view of the deep structural changes over the last 25 years, which have affected foundational beliefs about the roles of government in social and human affairs, it would seem that more emphasis could be placed on best practices and techniques administrative leaders have used.

The book's practical emphasis makes it a valuable resource, particularly for managers. As a tool for future research in administrative leadership, however, the book provides little help. The editors note that few existing studies, particularly from leading public administration journals, have published administrative leadership research. Accordingly, little is known about the field. To help fill this gap, the editors might show how accounts of leadership practices, techniques, behaviors, and values could be used for developing empirical studies. Van Wart offers a sketch of a leadership model on page 14, but he gives readers little conceptual background. This model is depicted as the leader's assessment of environmental constraints and opportunities, along with personal traits and styles as well as organizational goals and fashioning them into an action strategy. From the formulation, and, by

implication the implementation of it, the leader can evaluate strategy effectiveness. Similarly, the writer proposes a "possible" definition of leadership without referencing existing literature. The definition and its relationship to the sketch would enable researchers to further develop the concepts described in the section. The book also lacks a concluding or summarizing chapter, which could be used as a vehicle for future research. Central or emergent concepts from the chapters could shed much light for further studies and best practices. The concluding framework would do much to create reader ties between the 39 book chapters.

For its utility as a reference for understanding public leadership in particular contexts, *Administrative Leadership in the Public Sector* makes an important contribution to the field. It builds on classical administrative theories and integrates their applications in various public contexts. It offers suggestions for carrying out a key function of public administrators in shaping and administering policy. A weakness is the lack of research implications that could extend knowledge and competencies in change management and public leader theory development. As one of the few steps toward a broader conceptualization of administrative leadership, however, the book provides some much-needed insight into the challenges of and opportunities for managing in complex, politically driven bureaucracies and the rewards of serving competently and heroically in the public's interest.

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