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Three Approaches to Innovation Leadership
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Document Version
Accepted author manuscript

Published in:
International Journal of Public Sector Management

DOI:
10.1108/IJPSM-06-2021-0152

Publication date:
2022

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Citation for published version (APA):

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Managing Innovation on the Public Frontline:

Three Approaches to Innovation Leadership

**Purpose:** For decades, there has been a call for the public sector to be more innovative, and there is widespread agreement that managers play a crucial role in meeting this goal. Most studies of innovation management focus on top-level managers, despite the fact that most innovation activities take place on the frontlines, deeply embedded in professional practice. Meanwhile, micro-level studies of innovation tend to focus on the agency of employees, which leaves a knowledge gap regarding the mobilising role of frontline managers. This is unfortunate because frontline managers are in a unique position to advance the state of the art of their professions, in scaling public innovation and in implementing public reform.

**Research design:** To explore how frontline managers approach innovation, a case study has been constructed based on in-depth interviews with 20 purposely selected frontline managers, all working within the Danish public childcare sector.

**Findings:** The article explores how frontline managers perceive their role in public innovation and finds three distinct approaches to innovation leadership: a responsive, a strategic and a facilitating approach.

**Originality/value:** This paper contributes to the research on public management by applying existing research on leadership styles in order to discuss the implications of how frontline managers perceive their role in relation to public innovation.

**Keywords:** Public service innovation, innovation management, frontline, innovation leadership, leadership styles

Introduction

The innovation agenda was propagated in the public sector during the New Public Management era (Osborne and Brown, 2011) and has since been institutionalised through policy documents, public innovation schemes and the employment of innovation advocates in municipalities, regions and state agencies (Hjelmar, 2019). The purpose of public innovation is to create public value (Moore, 1995, 2013) or address the so-called ‘wicked problems’ of today (Brorström, 2015; Geuijen et al., 2017).

Public innovation activities often follow in the wake of public reform or changes in the organization’s internal or external circumstances. However, innovative solutions result in value for the public only if they are proficiently implemented by frontline workers (Pihl-Thingvad and Klausen, 2020).

Generally, innovative organizations are believed to perform better (Sethibe and Steyn, 2015), and leadership is often claimed to be a crucial element in releasing the innovative potential of the public sector (van der Voet, 2016; Ricard et al., 2017; Hijal-Moghrabi, Sabharwal and Ramanathan, 2020). Nevertheless, political ambitions and organizational strategies often remain decoupled from their implementation (Pihl-Thingvad and Klausen, 2020). Meanwhile, public innovation is not always initiated by visionary politicians. In fact, innovation takes place at all levels of the public hierarchy (Borins, 2014). Therefore, a stream of innovation research has directed the focus away from the top-level management towards the agency of employees invoking terms such as ‘everyday innovation’ (Pedersen and Johansen, 2012; Lippke and Wegener, 2014), ‘bricolage’ (Fuglsang and Sørensen, 2011), ‘employee-driven innovation’ (Kesting and Ulhøi, 2010; Wihlman et al., 2015) or simply ‘bottom-up innovation’ (Arundel, Casali and Hollanders, 2015). While scholars agree that leadership is important in innovation processes, those leaders who are closest to the employees – the first line managers or team leaders – remain understudied in both streams of research, most likely because the bottom-up perspective considers frontline managers to be part of management, while the top-down perspective consider them to be part of the frontline (Keulemans and Groeneveld, 2020). Consequently, in relation to public sector innovation, very few studies have dealt specifically with the leadership position of frontline managers (also known as daily managers, team managers, first-line supervisors, etc.) (Hupe and Keiser, 2019).
While public managers are most likely well aware that they need to get their employees ‘on board’ in order to introduce organizational changes, there remain practical questions of how to encourage staff to engage in innovation (Hansen and Pihl-Thingvad, 2019). Should they step back and allow the employees to drive innovation? Should they limit their focus to implementing policies and municipal strategies? Or should they take initiatives themselves, assuming greater responsibility for the daily operative performance? And how do they go about it? In investigating these challenges, the following research question is posed: How do frontline managers perceive their leadership role in relation to public service innovation, and what are the implications?

In order to explore this question, an inductive case study was constructed based on 20 in-depth interviews with frontline managers working within public childcare organizations, who consider innovation leadership relevant to their work. Frontline managers in childcare share the same professional background as the staff, often spending up to a third of their working hours ‘on the floor’. Consequently, they interact regularly with children, parents, the municipal administration and of course the staff.

The paper is structured as follows: first, public service innovation is defined along with relevant insights concerning innovation management and leadership styles. Second, the methods used to construct the case and collecting data are described. Third, the interview data is analysed and organized into three distinct approaches to frontline innovation leadership. Finally, the implications of the findings for future studies of public innovation leadership are discussed.

Managing public innovation

This section begins by conveying what innovation means in the context of public service organizations. Then studies of public management are reviewed focusing on findings relevant to the frontline and innovation, and finally, insights from research on public leadership are brought in to form a basis for the discussion of the findings.

Before presenting the state of the art in the literature, it is necessary to clarify that this article employs the term ‘frontline’ for public service organizations that come into face-to-face contact with the citizens whom they serve. These organizations are also referred to as ‘street-level bureaucracies’ by some researchers (coined by Lipsky, 1980). The services delivered by the frontline staff are characterised by a simultaneous
production and consumption, meaning that the services materialize in the interactions between professionals and citizens (Osborne and Brown, 2005). Unlike the more commonly studied category of ‘middle managers’ who are placed below the top-level strategic management and above the first-level supervisors (Wooldridge, Schmid and Floyd, 2008), the daily managers interviewed for this study are an integral part of the frontline; hence the term ‘frontline managers.’ As some studies use the term ‘middle managers’ rather broadly, it should be specified that the frontline managers referred to in this study represent the level of managers who are positioned directly above the frontline staff in the organizational hierarchy.

In a recent chapter on the first-line supervision of street-level bureaucrats, Hupe and Keiser (2019) found that while the ‘in-between’ position of first-line supervisors makes them subject to influence from all possible directions, the frontline managers’ core-task is ensuring that the staff delivers what they are expected to. From a top-down perspective, because frontline managers often share the same professional background as the staff, they are considered part of bottom-up innovation. Meanwhile, they are also expected to assist the executive management in implementing reforms and political initiatives. From a bottom-up perspective, therefore, the frontline managers are viewed as part of management. Although first-line supervisors have received increasing research interest in the field of public sector management, research on street-level bureaucracy has tended to overlook the practice of these managers in relation to innovation and change.

Public innovation on the frontline

It has been 20 years since Borins (2001) established that innovation should be stimulated throughout the public hierarchy. Contrary to what one might expect, public innovation does not always descend from visionary politicians, but more commonly from the employees or from the middle line. The term ‘innovation’ is a loaded word with positive connotations. As a growing number of organizations have learned to describe their activities as innovations, definitions of the phenomenon have become contested.

The distinction between planned and emergent innovation lies at the heart of the ongoing debate about the potential of public innovation. Some scholars argue that emergent innovation creates added value by drawing on existing strengths and resources
of the organization and of the professions (Fuglsang and Sørensen, 2011; Pedersen and Johansen, 2012; Lippke and Wegener, 2014; Wihlman et al., 2015). Meanwhile, other scholars argue that the advantages of planned innovation lie in the opportunity to draw in knowledge and ideas from outside the organization and to seek for more radical solutions to complex problems (Harris and Albury, 2009; Hartley, Sørensen and Torfing, 2013; Crosby, ‘t Hart and Torfing, 2017). In spite of academic efforts to patrol the boundaries of the term, the opaque interpretation of innovation among practitioners has led to high self-reported levels of innovation in innovation statistics from both the private and the public sectors (Bugge and Bloch, 2016).

A definition of innovation suitable for the scope of this article is found in a study of innovation in welfare services. According to this definition, ‘innovation is the intentional introduction and application within a role, group or organization of ideas, processes, products or procedures, new to the relevant unit of adoption, designed to significantly benefit the individual, the group, the organization or wider society’ (West and Farr, 1990, as quoted in Wihlman et al., 2015, p. 162). Notable in this definition of innovation is the emphasis on intentional improvement, as well as the commonly accepted qualification of ‘newness,’ to the adopting unit, rather than new to the world as such (also found in Rogers, 2003).

Innovation that emerges from within public service organizations usually targets the core-task and is therefore typically closely linked to the practice of the professionals (Borins, 2014). Often, the innovations aim to improve work processes (work smarter, not harder) or to develop new services for the users (De Vries, Bekkers and Timmers, 2016). In either case, when the innovation seeks to improve an aspect of the daily practice of professionals, it must be integrated into the existing routines, logics and habits of the organization. This embeddedness has led some scholars to argue that innovations are never inserted into an empty space. They enter into a reciprocal process of translation, where both the innovation and the existing practices are adjusted to fit (Pedersen and Johansen, 2012). This translation of new practices into the routines of the organization requires conscious reflection by the individual employee, regardless of whether the new practice emerged from within the organization or was introduced as part of a larger plan or reform.
In research on innovation capacity in frontline organizations, it has been argued that employees must experience that they are able to take some level of responsibility for their work and are able to work creatively in the workplace (Tierney and Farmer, 2011; Wegener and Tanggaard, 2013). Moreover, innovation can be viewed as a function of learning and knowledge creation, because doing something new inevitably begins by learning something new (Wegener and Tanggaard, 2013). A central aspect of organizational learning is the ability to identify the relevance of new knowledge, which requires some level of existing knowledge. The cumulative nature of learning, which means that the more you learn, the more you can learn, is also said to work for innovation, so that the more you innovate, the more you can innovate (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990). Following this logic, the ability to learn something new or to innovate is not a divine gift, but something that can be trained in the hope of generating a positive spiral. In service organizations, this capacity is based on the careful observation and assessment of one’s own practices that may have previously been taken for granted and then imagining that these practices could be conducted differently (Alvesson, Blom and Svenningsson, 2017; Willis, 2019).

While large scale collaborative innovation projects may pose very visible management challenges (Hartley, Sørensen and Torfing, 2013), this study argues that continuous, emergent innovation also requires managerial attention and cultivation. Although some employees may take it upon themselves to innovate on their own initiative, ‘under the radar, it is important to scaling innovation as well as implementing new policy and reform that ideas and practices are shared in collegial collective spaces. Considering the constraints on managers at the bottom of the bureaucratic hierarchy, the most effective tool these managers possess is their leadership skills. Specifically, their ability to make people follow them and join the organization’s journey forward using persuasion or some level of accommodation or brokering (Osborne and Brown, 2005).

Public innovation management

Research on innovation in public administration and management has provided crucial knowledge about the barriers and drivers of innovation (Walker, 2014; Cinar, Trott and Simms, 2019; Thøgersen, Waldorff and Steffensen, 2020), about innovation in governance (Moore and Hartley, 2008; Sørensen and Torfing, 2019; Costumato, 2021), and about the role of top-level managers (Ricard et al., 2017). However, findings
suggest that the development of public policy is often decoupled from its implementation (Pihl-Thingvad and Klausen, 2020) and that top-down strategies should be combined with other, locally embedded strategies (Ryan et al., 2008). There are external conditions such as changing demographics, budgets and legislation that lie beyond the influence of frontline managers. Within the grasp of frontline managers, however, are the intra-organizational conditions for innovating. These conditions can be influenced by leadership practices aimed at facilitating innovation processes, mobilizing support, providing resources (time to reflect, discuss and experiment), increasing knowledge and working to establish an innovative culture in the organization (Cinar, Trott and Simms, 2019).

Tidd and Bessant (2018) have argued that innovation management is substantially different from management in general, where the main priority is to maintain stability. Routines and standardization are said to impede public innovation; hence, active leadership is needed so that employees do not drift back into maintaining the organizational routines rather than innovating them (van de Ven, 1986). Osborne and Brown (2005) have described the tension in organizations between the need to be efficient and the need to be innovative, which require different leadership styles. They also make a relevant distinction between the managerial roles in relation to bottom-up innovation versus the managerial role in top-down innovation. Bottom-up innovation requires the manager to enable and support innovation by frontline staff, whereas top-down innovation requires the manager to advocate an innovation and ‘sell’ it to the staff (Osborne and Brown, 2005, p. 189).

Accepting the complexities of modern organizations means coming to terms with such tensions. Frontline managers must continually balance the need for stability and change (Lippke and Wegener, 2014). It is therefore important that they endeavour to stimulate an innovative climate in the organization by providing a clear vision, encouragement and regular feedback for employees (Loewenberger, Newton and Wick, 2014).

In the field of public administration, the most commonly applied ‘full-range leadership theory’ is comprised by transactional, transformational and laissez faire leadership. Out of these three styles, transformational leadership is the most researched in both generic leadership studies and in public administration specifically (Hansen and
Rather than promoting one leadership style as the most appropriate for innovation management, there seems to be a growing consensus that different leadership styles can have different effects on employees’ innovative behaviour. This means that various styles may be suitable for the different challenges facing an organization. Hansen and Pihl-Thingvad (2019) add to this observation that more work is needed to understand how public managers encourage their staff to engage in innovation, which is the issue addressed in this study.

Summing up, innovation activities on the frontlines are embedded in the everyday interactions and practices of the staff (Lippke and Wegener, 2014; Pedersen, 2020). Innovation can emerge from within the organization, or it can be part of a larger, planned process. Managing innovation in public service organizations concerns balancing the employees’ freedom to experiment while maintaining the focus of attention on a shared vision for the organization (Loewenberger, Newton and Wick, 2014). The question of how frontline managers perceive this leadership task will be explored in the analysis.

**Data and empirical background**

This article is based on an exploratory case study (Yin, 2018) of frontline management in public service organizations, specifically, the public childcare sector in Denmark. While there are contextual and organizational differences between different kinds of public service sectors, public childcare makes a good case for studying frontline management in public service organizations, especially caregiving professions. Just as in policing, nursing or teaching, daily managers typically share the same professional background as their staff and like the aforementioned professions, they interact directly with stakeholders e.g. citizens (children), next of kin (parents), staff members, other managers in their municipality and with the municipal administration. This makes them uniquely positioned to analyse the state of the organization and interpret the state of the art in their profession, as well as the current political climate. In public childcare facilities, an average of 60% of the staff are trained pedagogues with a bachelor’s degree in pedagogy. The remainder of the staff have either no formal training, or they work as pedagogical assistants, which requires two years of training. All Danish public childcare institutions are subject to an annual audit, where the municipal administration evaluates the performance of each facility. Approximately 95% of all Danish children...
are clients in a childcare facility during the first six years of their lives. Danish parents are free to sign up their children for any childcare facility in the municipality, resulting in some competition among the institutions. This differentiates childcare organizations from public service organizations that do not compete for clients, such as police units or unemployment offices.

As is common in qualitative research, the aim of the study was to gather an ‘authentic’ understanding of how public managers on the frontline make sense of innovation leadership (Seale and Silverman, 1997). The data in this case thus consists of 20 open-ended interviews (interview guide attached in Appendix 1) with purposely selected daily managers in different childcare facilities, each located in a different municipality. Each interview lasted an average of 60 minutes, and there was also a 30-minute tour of the facility. The interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed in NVivo, which is a common way to ensure descriptive validity (Seale and Silverman, 1997; Huberman and Miles, 2002).

Before initiating the interviews, two conferences for childcare professionals were attended in order to obtain a sense of the conversation on innovation in the field of public childcare, which in combination with desk research of archival data and ‘grey literature’ served to increase the theoretical sensitivity of the analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The first couple of participants were recruited at these conferences, and the participants list was used as a gross-list of possible interviewees to be contacted. This list was supplemented with managers from facilities that received media coverage from local newspapers or professional magazines, or they were identified through simple Google searches for childcare facilities in specific municipalities. The intention was to mix the recruitment strategy, such that some informants were selected based on an expressed interest in innovation and others chosen randomly from a list of municipal childcare facilities. In this way, some level of variation in terms of the managers’ engagement in the innovation agenda was obtained. Approximately one in three or four of the invited managers agreed to be interviewed; the remainder either did not respond or rejected the invitation. In selecting informants, geographical variation was considered, with some interviewees from rural areas and some from urban areas, as well as interviewees with variations in seniority and gender. In analysing the data, however, these variables did not appear to have any impact on the results, but in all likelihood,
this effort to create variation in the informants’ characteristics served to increase the robustness of the findings (Seawright and Gerring, 2008).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Management Tenure</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Recruitment source</th>
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<td>Senior</td>
<td>9.1.19</td>
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<td>Senior</td>
<td>18.1.19</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Senior</td>
<td>18.1.19</td>
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<td>Senior</td>
<td>19.2.19</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Senior</td>
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<td>Junior</td>
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<td>Junior</td>
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<td>Junior</td>
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</table>

Table 1: Informants – variance and recruitment

An important choice in the design of this case study has to do with how the study was framed in recruiting informants, which arguably resulted in a strong selection bias. As the study set out to explore ‘how frontline managers approach innovation leadership,’ emphasis was placed on selecting informants who considered themselves to be engaged in innovation. The strategy was to construct a case which could generate as much learning as possible (Stake, 1994). The headline of the recruitment email was entitled ‘Innovation in Childcare?’ The wording inevitably risks putting off those potential informants who might have found the topic of innovation to be irrelevant. The result of the recruitment process is a sample with a self-professed interest in innovation. However, since the studied topic is innovation leadership, a more vague invitation such as ‘Leadership in childcare’ might have resulted in less selection bias, but would not
necessarily have provided better knowledge about the topic as such. An overview of the innovation activities described by the interviewees is listed in Appendix 2.

After conducting 20 interviews, the topics of the interview guide were saturated, as the responses to the questions were becoming similar and appeared to be more predictable. The interviews were analysed in order to explore how the managers approach innovation management, which displayed more significant differences than e.g. gender, tenure and geography.

Danish public childcare facilities are part of a larger municipal organization and the managerial hierarchy consists of at least three layers below the political leadership. Top-level managers are centre chiefs in charge of all childcare facilities in the municipality. District managers can be categorized as middle-managers and are typically in charge of 5-10 childcare facilities. The daily managers are in charge of the daily operations of a single facility, which typically employs 10-20 professionals. In some municipalities, the daily managers in a district collaborate frequently and work as a management team. In other municipalities they operate more autonomously.

Analytical strategy

The study employs a thematic analysis to identify commonalities in the way issues concerning innovation management are experienced and talked about in multiple sites (Braun and Clarke, 2012). As is common in thematic analysis, the focus is on the content of what is being said and therefore, the analysis focuses on the themes of the stories that managers tell (Riessman, 2008). As this study aims to explore how frontline managers approach innovation, special attention has been given to how the managers present their own role in innovation activities, their expectations for the staff, the sources of legitimacy and authority referred to in their accounts, and their aspirations connected with innovation in their professional practice.

The analysis followed Braun and Clarke’s (2012) six phases of thematic analysis, although unstructured, preliminary interpretations of data had already begun as the interviews were conducted. The formal analysis of data proceeded as follows: 1) All interviews were fully transcribed in NVivo and subsequently read as an assembled text in order to create familiarity with the data and a basic overview of the stories. 2) An initial coding was conducted for each interview using NVivo. The coding process
revealed multiple themes (see coding scheme in Appendix 3), some of which were not relevant to the research question of this paper, e.g., types of innovation. 

3) The three approaches to innovation leadership emerged as central themes, in that some managers presented themselves as responsive or awaiting ideas from staff, some as very ‘clear’ and authoritative and some as facilitating and ‘consultant-like,’ with brainstorms on flip-overs and workshop techniques. 

4) The codes were then organized according to the three approaches. 

5) A variety of different labels for the three approaches were tested and discussed with colleagues before settling on the three labels: (1) the responsive approach; (2) the facilitating approach; (3) the strategic approach. The overall findings have been summarized in table 2. 

6) Finally, power quotes (Pratt, 2008) were selected from the codes in order to provide a coherent narrative, introducing readers to the data and categories discovered. After the analysis was conducted, it became clear that the findings were related to prior research on leadership styles. These were then reviewed in order to inform the discussion of the implications.

**Analysis**

In the analysis, the approaches to innovation leadership presented by the daily managers are inductively divided into three categories. The division is based on the managers’ accounts of their own role, their expectations for employees; the sources of legitimacy to which they refer; and their objectives for innovating the practice of the professionals. Prior studies of leadership styles suggest that each approach has strengths and weaknesses according to the organizational context (Pedersen et al., 2019), which will be addressed in the discussion.

**Responsive approach:**

In the first of the three approaches, the managers present themselves as egalitarian and attentive to the well-being of the staff and children. The manager’s primary concern here is the stable operation of the organization. Therefore, initiatives to develop new services or change work processes are usually made by the staff members, who only later work to mobilise support from their manager. As described by one manager:

> I wouldn’t say it’s necessarily something I control. Some of the employees might be interested in something, and they pitch some ideas. And then, some of the others might think that it’s a really good idea.
In the responsive approach, the managers find legitimacy for innovating in their shared professional background with staff, which is emphasized by referrals to common values regarding what is best for the children. Some managers who apply this approach express a sense of responsibility to protect staff from as much outside interference as possible. These managers, pedagogues themselves, consider ideas stemming from non-professionals less legitimate than initiatives taken by those whom they regard as most knowledgeable about the children’s needs. If the organization is to introduce an innovation from outside, such as implementing a compulsory municipal directive, the responsive approach proceeds gradually so as to allow everyone to get on board. For example, when asked about the implementation of a municipal digital strategy, which involved the use of tablets and devices, one manager experienced some reluctance at first:

There was some resistance in the beginning, I think. But it had mostly to do with questions like: ‘Do we even know how to do this?’ Right? But eventually, we sort of discovered as a joint group that it wasn’t actually that difficult.

The manager interprets this resistance among the employees to stem from a sense of insecurity or anxiety and the consequent need for reassurance.

The two examples above, while revealing opposing views of the staff, nonetheless invite the same strategy from the manager. In the first example, the staff are portrayed as capable professionals who need to be protected from outside interference so that they can develop their ideas derived from their professional interactions with the children. In the second example, the staff is portrayed as being sensitive or anxious about new, potentially disorienting measures from above. They thus need to be protected in order to avoid stress or misplaced focus from their core-tasks. In both cases, it is the manager’s role to tune in to the responses from the staff, to be considerate and attentive to their reactions.

In the responsive approach, it is the professional doctrine of serving the interests of the children that provides legitimacy behind innovative measures. In this understanding, it is the staff who represent the primary resources for innovation, as they possess the best information about what is best for the children. One manager went further than most by assigning her staff responsibility for a small portion of the budget:
They are experts in their own fields, you know. And of course, there may be some areas where I might just as well be an expert […] but I think it’s important that it’s them who are the experts and me who sort of makes enquiries and asks them to explain why something is important.

The daily managers emphasize their responsibility for ensuring stable operations. This includes covering gaps in the schedule if someone is ill and resolving practical issues throughout any given day. This responsibility of getting through the day may affect the manager’s amount of resources for development, as one manager confides:

> Often, I spend over 15 hours on the floor in a week. […] Of course, you could say that I should just take the time I need for leadership. But it’s hard to watch when some of the staff are alone with 20 kids in the afternoon, you know? And some of these children need a bit of extra effort and support.

The quote illustrates how the time and resources for management tasks can come under pressure due to the professional values of prioritising the well-being of the staff and children before all else.

Summing up, the responsive approach is responsive to the interests of the staff and management higher up in the organization. When enacting this approach, the manager attempts to protect the organization from unnecessary disturbance. If the organization is to engage in innovation, it will likely be initiated by staff or higher management, whereas the manager will focus on making sure everyone is heard and on board. The manager primarily serves to coordinate incoming ideas rather than articulate a shared vision for the organization.

**Facilitating approach:**

In the facilitating approach to innovation management, the focus is more on the process of innovating than the outcome. Managers who use this approach consider innovation processes to be opportunities for shared learning and development. They emphasize their responsibility to promote a culture of collective sharing and individual reflection. In turn, all staff are expected to participate and engage in group exercises.

In the facilitating approach, the manager decides that the time is right to innovate within a given area of the organization and then invites the staff to reflect on
and decide how to define a given problem and its solution. One manager explains how
she applies pedagogical philosophy of the organization in her management methods:

The staff work by following the children’s lead and observing what the children are
interested in. I sort of do the same and look for what the staff is interested in - what
we should - well, I mean, what path I should follow right now, in this context.

The facilitating leader has a coaching approach to management and sees it as their
responsibility to acknowledge the staff and challenge them to become better versions of
themselves. The professional development of the staff is the primary concern. One
manager explains how she organized the teams around different areas of expertise that
could potentially raise the bar in each team:

The municipality has a concept called ‘Professional Beacons,’ which involves a
selection of employees who have had special training in inclusion, action learning
and language supervision. The staff can join any team they like, as long as the
beacons are in separate teams, because they are sort of mini-leaders who can
assume different roles and supervise the others a little.

The manager assumes responsibility for framing reflection processes, and the staff are
expected to participate actively. It would not be considered legitimate to rely on the
routines of yesterday or for the staff to remain detached from professional development
processes. Managers facilitate shared reflection processes through open questions to
their staff, feedback during practice and through collective reflection exercises in teams.
When asked about her own role in a brainstorming exercise, one manager elaborated on
her attempt to open up the discussion within the group:

So, that’s my role. To ask these types of questions: ‘Hey, how might this look for
them?’…‘Sure, it could do such and such…’ because they will really want to
defend their ideas and that means we need to find new solutions. […] We have to
acknowledge each other’s tasks and conditions, you know, because they can be
very, very different […] but that doesn’t mean that it can’t be done.

Summing up, a manager who applies the facilitating approach focuses on providing a
collective space for reflection and sharing ideas. Managers who uses this approach
expects employees to engage actively in finding new solutions that can improve the
work carried out. The manager considers each employee a valuable source of professional knowledge that should be supported in order to maximise the staff’s commitment and special knowledge.

**Strategic approach:**

Frontline managers who apply the strategic approach to innovation endeavour to mobilise staff support for their visions and decisions. In this respect, the strategic approach to innovation is less collaborative, although the focus remains on developing professional practice during the working day. The manager who uses the strategic approach will not shy away from assuming a position of professional authority and offering insights into how certain situations should be interpreted and handled. Managers praise staff for being able to both understand and then follow management visions and be adaptable to change. The manager finds legitimacy for innovating in municipal regulation or in what they consider to be relevant research.

In the strategic approach, it is considered the managers’ responsibility of the manager to make tough choices that will achieve visible results and communicate these ‘upwards’ in the municipal hierarchy. In return for the achievements made by the organization, the manager will expect upper management to support their efforts:

> I strive to be very clear in my role and implicitly state: I know what I’m doing, but it’s very, very important that you, as local government, are with me. Because there’s going to be some controversy when I go in and make some of these decisions as a manager.

The managers emphasize their responsibility to introduce necessary developments to the organization and to ‘sell’ the organizational goals to the staff. In turn, the staff is expected to acknowledge the purpose of the plan and to do their best to contribute to its fulfilment. If a staff member is not in agreement with the manager’s visions for the organization’s work, they are likely to need to go their separate ways:

> I’ve been here for three-and-a-half years and during that time we’ve been through many changes. It’s easy for some and difficult for others. […] Some are really good at acknowledging that, but there are certainly also some who are tired, you know. And that’s why we have such a huge staff turnover. […] It’s my way or the
highway [smiles]. No, but I have a lot of conversations with them and tell them that this is where we’re going.

Another manager explains how she expects her staff to be open to changes once they have been decided upon, while she assumes responsibility for bringing strong arguments to support the rationale behind each decision:

For instance, I’d made some announcements to the staff about how we were to work from the first of May, and then I kept getting approached by an employee who was stuck in the old way of thinking. And I was thinking: I simply don’t get it. I’ve been very clear about this. […] So the job is to keep being able to translate what has been written down, keep on pulling out some research on the topic, keep on disseminating it and helping an employee like her to understand it.

In the strategic approach, the primary resources for innovation lies with either the manager who is expected to be visionary and to possess expert knowledge or with the municipal management, who represent the political leadership. Employees play the role of followers, and they are appreciated for being adaptable to change.

In the strategic approach, managers pride themselves on continuously seeking out new information and keeping up with the latest findings; they draw on books and articles from their own or neighbouring disciplines, such as psychology, neuroscience or sociology. One manager sees it as central to her feedback to employees to provide scientific input to practical problems:

I can bring the latest research and tell them what people are working on and what makes sense for a child. Also, I can explain where a child is in their development. All these things.

Furthermore, a clear distinction is made between popular and scientific knowledge:

You have to be able to tell me where you got it from. There are some family therapists on TV that we’d never rely on […] we should always rely on professionals, like psychologists who know something about children’s development.
Summing up, the strategic approach places responsibility for innovating on the manager or the municipal management. Managers are expected to assume the role of visionary experts who are willing and able to create results, even if it includes making unpopular decisions. Employees are expected to comply with the decisions made by the manager. The strategic manager appreciates employees for being adaptable to change and they are considered intelligent and courageous if they quickly see the point of the manager’s initiatives.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approach to innovation</th>
<th>Responsive</th>
<th>Facilitating</th>
<th>Strategic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bottom-up: if employees get an idea and mobilize support from colleagues, the manager is likely to support it. It is typically adjustments within the existing framework or implementation of requirements “from above” the organization.</td>
<td>Collaborative: the manager may have selected overall goals or themes, but the staff is invited to select methods and contents within the framework. E.g. tools to systematically evaluate/reflect and develop practice.</td>
<td>Top-down: the manager will diagnose the state of the organization and assume responsibility for implementing a cure. This may include difficult decisions like discontinuing popular traditions or introducing challenging goals.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources of legitimacy and authority</td>
<td>Legitimacy for decisions comes from the discretion of the staff. Authority comes from “higher up in the system” who can give orders that the professionals cannot influence.</td>
<td>Legitimacy comes from the inclusive process. Focus is on the professional development of the staff. Authority comes from the process of group conversations.</td>
<td>Legitimacy for decisions comes from the formal role as manager – tough decisions are a part of the job. Authority comes from science and the manager’s expertise.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roles for employees</td>
<td>Strong employees can have a high level of influence. Employees with low professional confidence may stagnate.</td>
<td>Employees should participate in shared reflection and contribute to good conversations. They should be willing to evolve and acknowledge room for improvement.</td>
<td>Employees are acknowledged for compliance and professionalism, and their willingness to adapt and support the decisions made by management.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic goals</td>
<td>High employee satisfaction: a good workplace where staff can spend as much energy as possible on “the core tasks.”</td>
<td>Shared development. Nurturing curiosity. Lifelong learning.</td>
<td>Professional excellence. Meeting or exceeding goals of municipal government. Making the organization stand out with unique profile.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Comparative summary of the three approaches to managing everyday innovation.
Table 2 shows how the approaches to innovation leadership resemble traits of generic leadership styles studied in public administration, such as laissez faire, transformational or transactional leadership. The implications of this finding will be discussed in the following.

**Discussion**

The analysis identified three approaches to innovation leadership among frontline managers in public childcare. The ways that frontline managers approach innovation management are important due to their everyday proximity to their staff and because as managers within a larger municipal organization, they are accountable for the quality of the professional practice in their facility. Moreover, if public organizations are to keep up with the state of the art in their professions, and if political initiatives are to have any actual consequence for citizens, frontline managers must engage their staff in innovation processes.

The first approach to public innovation management found in the analysis was labelled the responsive approach. It could be argued that the responsive approach to innovation leadership hardly resemble innovation leadership at all. In this approach, the managers’ predominant focus is on maintaining organizational stability and employee well-being. It seems likely that with this approach, any initiative to innovate would come from someone other than the formal leader. This would include innovative initiatives ‘under the radar,’ detached from organizational strategies and thus does not require management encouragement. Responsive innovative leadership therefore resembles what in the public administration literature would be termed a ‘laissez-faire’ or ‘passive’ leadership style (Jensen *et al*., 2019). In this approach, the daily manager assumes a responsive position towards the staff and primarily serves to coordinate initiatives and attend to the concerns of the staff. While ‘passive leadership’ has a rather negative ring to it, the empathetic commitment to employee well-being which is also characteristic of this approach is described in organizational psychology in a leadership style called ‘servant leadership.’ In a recent meta-review, Lee *et al*., (2020) discovered that servant leadership enhances organizational performance; however, this effect was found to be stronger for those employees with longer work experience than for those with shorter organizational tenure. This finding corresponds to Alvesson, Blom and Svenningsson's (2017) observation that teams with high professional self-esteem and
existing high levels of engagement may favour a laissez-faire leadership style because they request less active leadership. In such cases, the responsive approach, despite its ostensible passivity, may actually empower the staff, even enhancing innovative capacity in an organization, as several studies suggest (Miao et al., 2018; Naqshbandi and Tabche, 2018; Kang, Park and Sorensen, 2021). However, in teams where the staff is considered vulnerable and more prone to favour the status quo, a lack of initiative from their manager can have a negative effect. Manager passivity in this case risks causing the organization to stagnate, to miss out on opportunities and to be less prepared to tackle changes in the environment.

The second, facilitating approach to innovation leadership found in the analysis is the style that most clearly resembles what one might expect innovation leadership to look like. The interviewed managers showed a keen interest in the process of innovating and in the learning outcomes; they sought to inspire the individual staff member to improve at their own level. The managers had a preference for high involvement and utilised engagement methods such as facilitating reflection workshops or including staff and parents in decision-making. The facilitating approach works systematically to promote innovation activities through templates and procedures that serve to stimulate the employees’ creativity, engagement and agency while channelling their efforts towards a shared vision. It is similar to transformational leadership, which is the leadership style most commonly associated with innovation in organizations (Sethibe and Steyn, 2015), where managers lead by motivating and inspiring employees through a shared vision (Andersen et al., 2018; Hansen and Pihl-Thingvad, 2019; Jensen et al., 2019).

Finally, the strategic approach places the majority of the responsibility on the manager and leaves little room for others to influence interpretation and planning. The strategic approach was most distinct in organizations where the managers had identified a need for substantial change due to inadequate performance. As the innovations introduced into the organization touched the very foundation of the profession, the managers would refer to them as ‘back to basics,’ even though these basics appeared to be new to the organization. The manager would attempt to establish a position of professional authority by referring to scientific findings or legislation. This approach bears some resemblance to a transactional leadership style, which, as the name suggests involves some sort of rewards for good performance and sanction for inadequate results.
A comparative analysis of leadership styles among public executive managers suggests, that the transactional leadership style is associated with authoritative and problem-oriented leadership qualities (Lewis, Ricard and Klijn, 2018), a finding that also corresponds to the strategic approach to innovation found in the data. The transactional leadership style is often assumed to be less suitable for innovation than the transformational leadership style; nevertheless, a recent study suggests that verbal rewards may have a positive influence on the innovative behaviour of employees (Hansen and Pihl-Thingvad, 2019). The strategic approach thus focuses less on shared leadership and the encouragement of employee creativity. However, studies of ‘failing organizations’ suggest that this approach may be needed to facilitate a necessary change in organizations that are performing poorly (Murphy, 2010), just as it may hold an advantage in terms of maintaining attention through processes of innovation and change (van de Ven, 1986; Scott and Bruce, 1994; Radaelli and Sitton-Kent, 2016).

While there is no clear consensus about the causal effects of different leadership styles, perhaps in part because complex contextual conditions influence managers’ room to manoeuvre, there is scholarly agreement that managerial behaviour matters (Pedersen et al., 2019). However, ‘good’ management requires a certain musicality and analytical ability to assess which leadership style is called for in a given situation. The three approaches identified can thus be seen as points on a scale, which should be balanced depending on whether one seeks to cultivate employee engagement in emergent or planned innovation.

This study has a number of limitations. First, it is limited by the fact that the generic leadership preferences of the interviewed managers are unknown. Hence, future studies could explore if the preference in leadership changes with the managers’ perceptions of the task at hand. Another limitation has to do with the representativeness of the case, which was found in Danish public childcare. It is possible that these organizations enjoy greater flexibility in how they organize their work than those in sectors with more detailed regulation of e.g. procedures and output. Moreover, unlike e.g. home-helpers, childcare professionals work in teams within the same building and are thus privileged to have daily interactions with the staff during their working day. Competition among local childcare facilities may cause these organizations to be more influenced by the innovation agenda than sectors that have no competition for clients, such as policing or unemployment services. The approaches to innovation leadership
extracted from the data reflect managers’ self-reported perceptions of innovation and leadership. As a consequence, the analysis does not include observations of actual innovation processes or the perceptions of other actors. Another limitation of this study lies in the sample selection. Half of the respondents in this study were found randomly using municipal lists of institutions, the other half were recruited based on participation in professional conferences or local media coverage of development activities. The managers who participated in this study agreed to partake based on an invitation to discuss ‘innovation in childcare.’ This led to a strong selection bias, as all informants presumably found innovation in childcare to be a relevant topic of conversation. Moreover, the topic of innovation did not emerge spontaneously. The explicit theme of the interviews, concerning how managers work to engage staff and encourage innovation, leads the study towards focussing on planned innovation activities rather than instances of unintentional ad hoc innovation. Consequently, the study runs a risk of inflating the importance of leadership in frontline innovation. Keeping these limitations in mind, the results of this study should be relevant to both academics and practitioners.

**Conclusion**

The research question posed in this study was ‘How do frontline managers perceive of their leadership role in relation to public service innovation, and what are the implications?’ To answer this question, in-depth interviews with public managers were conducted in 20 Danish public childcare facilities and analysed thematically (Riessman, 2008; Braun and Clarke, 2012).

The analysis revealed three distinct approaches to innovation leadership. I the ‘responsive approach’ the manager assumed a relatively passive role and served to empower staff and coordinate their initiatives. The facilitating approach focused on motivating the staff by articulating a shared vision, and worked to engage the staff in a learning-oriented process using various facilitating methods. Finally, the third, more authoritative approach, which was labelled ‘the strategic approach’ concentrated on delivering high quality outputs in accordance with regulatory measures and the latest evidence-based research.

While the study provides insights useful to practitioners, it does not aim to single out any one of the three approaches as more useful or successful than the others. It is important to keep in mind that real-life public managers cannot be boxed in by any
one strategy that would be used in any and all situations. Innovation management that focuses exclusively on facilitating employee empowerment (Naqshbandi and Tabche, 2018) risks stagnating due to a lack of shared visions or priorities. Organizations that are in good shape may be able to exercise more autonomy and diversity in their daily practices because a shared foundation is in place (Andersen et al., 2018). In these organizations, innovation management can focus on empowering staff and supporting their pursuit of ideas as long as the staff share their thoughts with co-workers. However, in organizations that are performing inadequately, a more assertive management may be needed in order to establish common ground.

The findings from this case study contribute to the literature on public innovation management by examining how frontline managers perceive their role in innovation and by bringing in findings from research on leadership styles to discuss the implications. Previous studies on innovation management have focused primarily on the top-level managers and politicians (Ricard et al., 2017; Bason, 2018; Hansen and Pihl-Thingvad, 2019). Moreover, studies of the micro-processes in bottom-up innovation have tended to focus primarily on the agency of professionals (van Wessel, van Buuren and van Woerkum, 2011; Lippke and Wegener, 2014; Fuglsang, 2017). However, understanding the role of frontline managers in innovation processes is crucial for understanding how innovative ideas spread and how innovation is executed in the public sector (Bason, 2018).

References


## Appendix 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall question</th>
<th>Interview questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **A** What is innovation in childcare? | Think of the latest innovation process you went through  
• What was that about? (Type, purpose, recipients)  
• Was it characteristic for the changes you introduce or was it a one-off event?  
• Did something surprise you about the process? |
| **B** Where do you get inspiration and ideas? | • Where did the latest idea come from? How was it initiated? Who came along underway?  
• Do you participate in professional networks? Do your staff? Which?  
• What about informal and private networks? What do they mean?  
• How much space does decisions from “above” in the municipality of by the state take up?  
• Is it your experience that some ideas are invite more inspiration from outside the organization than others? |
| **C** Do you actively share your experiences with others? | • Formal and informal networks?  
• How easy do you think it would be for others to adopt your latest innovation? |
| **D** What role does different actors play? | • What are the parents’ roles?  
• What are the employees’ roles?  
• What are the children’s roles?  
• What are the local politicians’ roles?  
• What are others similar organizations’ roles? |
| **E** When is your organization ready to innovate? | • What conditions should be fulfilled before you find that the time is right to introduce a new idea?  
• Would you say that this organization is generally willing to take risks or experiment?  
• What might the challenges be related to these changes or new ideas? |
| **F** What does the future look like? | • Do you have something in the pipeline?  
• What will you pay extra attention to, next time you have to introduce something new? |
Appendix 2

Innovations referred to in interviews are summarized below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Innovation</th>
<th>Result</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manager’s sparring on focus-areas*</td>
<td>Reflection on individual practice</td>
<td>Relationship formation and perspective on children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Growth model” – and other template-based reflection tools*</td>
<td>Reflection on individual practice</td>
<td>Identification of challenges and potentials for children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collegial sparring on focus-areas*</td>
<td>Reflection on children’s perspectives and input</td>
<td>Inclusion of children’s perspectives on planning and togetherness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training and courses*</td>
<td>Knowledge about e.g. language stimulation</td>
<td>Improved opportunities for language stimulation for children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual experimentation model</td>
<td>Pushing personal boundaries, increased reflection on practice, new solutions tested</td>
<td>Variation of responsiveness, tailored solutions, inclusion of children’s perspectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New organization of children by age*</td>
<td>New group formations to support relationships</td>
<td>Better options for activities targeted children’s interests and level of development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital toys*</td>
<td>Content focus on science-skills and experimentation. Continuous training of staff</td>
<td>Focus on learning process rather than outcome in activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home-daycare suitcase*</td>
<td>Conversations about home-life and daycare-life</td>
<td>Improved communication between family and daycare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job-swap</td>
<td>Sparring and feedback, fresh eyes on practice, reflection</td>
<td>Increased collaboration between adjacent facilities, more homogenous service levels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-year plan</td>
<td>Continuous professional development, staff take turns leading projects across the organization, creative competition</td>
<td>Continuous renewal of content, high level of creativity, shared practice, increased quality of content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discontinuation of all annual events with parents*</td>
<td>more staff-hours for daily activities with children</td>
<td>improved adult-child ratio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizing children in smaller groups</td>
<td>calmer routine situations like meals</td>
<td>better opportunities for interaction between children and with adult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Action learning in routines</strong>*</td>
<td>Video documentation of practice and joint reflection</td>
<td>better collaboration between staff, fewer conflicts with children</td>
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<td>--------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased parent involvement with special focus on vulnerable families</td>
<td>Inviting parents to share their language for use in play and practical activities. Increased parents’ guidance for children in vulnerable positions.</td>
<td>Acknowledging bi-lingual identities of children. Viewing multiple languages as a resource rather than a barrier. A holistic/family oriented approach to support of vulnerable children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion of children's perspectives***</td>
<td>Reflection focus on children's resources, and adaption of learning environments to match the individual child</td>
<td>Releasing children's heterogeneous potential, improving the child's interaction with adults and other children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic professional structure***</td>
<td>Formalized division of labor and structure of routines</td>
<td>Fewer conflicts between staff and with children, more efficient use of time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills for difficult conversations</td>
<td>Better collaboration with parents, earlier identification of children in vulnerable positions</td>
<td>Earlier intervention for children in vulnerable positions and better collaboration with parents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playful approach to routines</td>
<td>Adults turn diaper changes, meals, and putting on outdoor wear into play</td>
<td>Children's interests are acknowledged and supported in social engagement with adults and other children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toy-library</td>
<td>Toys are collected, so there is enough items for a good game, and placed in a library, where the groups can take turns checking out toys for play</td>
<td>Better overview of toys/games, fewer conflicts during play, better play-time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dialogue-tool for parent-pedagogue meetings***</td>
<td>Parents and staff reflect and share child's status on a number of topics</td>
<td>Better conversations and joint effort on topics of concern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New pedagogical philosophy***</td>
<td>New approach to observing, engaging and conversing with children</td>
<td>Fewer conflicts with children, increased focus on children's resources</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Innovations found in more than one facility
Appendix 3

Categories:
1. Intuitive approach
2. Strategic approach
3. Facilitating approach

Codes:
Roles for employees:
- Co-creators
- Specialists
- Follower

Self-description
- Curious - Keeps up with newest knowledge and research
- Motivated by a desire to make a change
- Enables others to be the best version of themselves
- Sympathetic to concerns

Decision-making
- Awaiting employee initiatives
- Manager decides and persuades afterwards
- Facilitates team reflection – proposes different courses for action

Sources of authority
- From research and professional literature
- From formal management role
- From parent’s board
- From municipal leadership
- From collegial team