



Visie op publiek leiderschap: empirical research

*Research report by the Leiden Leadership Centre (Leiden University)
commissioned by Bureau Algemene Bestuursdienst*

Bureau Algemene Bestuursdienst is working on a new view ('vision') on public leadership. The Leiden Leadership Centre (Leiden University) contributes to this process as academic partner. Between May 2021 and October 2021, researchers from the Leiden Leadership Centre (Leiden University) conducted literature research and empirical research. The results of this multifaceted research project provide an evidence-base for the *new Visie op publiek leiderschap*. This summary contains the main findings of the empirical research.

Research objectives

This empirical study of leadership in the Rijksoverheid focuses on the ABD target group, line management, and civil servants without a formal leadership mandate. Its objective is threefold:

1. **To investigate the functioning of leadership:** how is leadership put into practice within the Rijksoverheid and what tensions and dilemmas are at play?
2. **To identify the presence of different elements of leadership:** in what form and to what extent is leadership present in the Rijksoverheid?
3. **To map leadership needs:** what leadership is needed within the Rijksoverheid?

Methodology

A mixed-methods approach

The researchers triangulate three research methods:

- **Focus groups:** nine qualitative group interviews with 54 participants from different work domains and hierarchical levels. These interviews provide insight into the workings of leadership within the Rijksoverheid (objective 1).
- **Questionnaire:** survey among 1996 government employees. The results show how managers and employees experience leadership in their own work environment (objective 2).
- **Conjoint analysis:** innovative research method that examines leadership needs with a focus on different directions of leadership (inward, upward, outward) and public values. The conjoint analysis is part of the questionnaire and provides insights into leadership needs in the Rijksoverheid (objective 3).

A multidimensional perspective on public leadership

The Leiden Leadership Centre (Leiden University) studies leadership as a process and behavior. Following this definition, leadership concerns characteristics of leaders as well as relationships and interactions. This calls for a multidimensional perspective involving formal leaders as well as other actors in leadership processes. The observations in this empirical study therefore draw on the experiences of both leaders and employees. In doing so, the researchers look at three directions in which leadership takes place: inward, upward, and outward.

Context matters

The Rijksoverheid is a large organization with substantial heterogeneity. This means that leadership needs and experiences are context dependent. The researchers therefore look at patterns and differences across work domains and hierarchical levels. They focus specifically on

examining relationships between leadership, context, outcomes, and person. This helps Bureau Algemene Bestuursdienst to facilitate a better person-job and person-environment fit.

Results

The empirical research shows that:

- executives within the Rijksoverheid already have a broad set of leadership behaviors at their disposal that they can deploy depending on the context;
- employees generally experience these leadership behaviors to a lesser extent than managers themselves;
- employees feel stimulated to show leadership themselves, but the preconditions for this are not always present.

Direction	Associated leadership behaviors
Upward	Providing critical advice, organizing preconditions, informing, justifying
Outward	Organizing support, monitoring developments connecting, perpetuating external cooperation
Inward	Stimulating reflection, providing space and direction, supporting, developing, setting an example

About the **directions** of leadership (inward, outward, and upward), the researchers note that ...

- leadership behaviors and needs in the three directions recur within all hierarchical levels and work domains.
- there is a heavy emphasis on inward leadership behaviors. This ties in with a tension that the researchers identify in their literature review: public leadership must find a balance between guidance and accountability along hierarchical lines (vertical) and task-oriented collaboration across organizational boundaries (horizontal).
- civil servants experience the need for leadership upwards, inwards and outwards differently. This depends on the hierarchical level at which they are employed.
- civil servants working at the same hierarchical level differ in their leadership needs. This is dependent on goals set in the job and in the organization.

Conclusions

The researchers conclude that:

- current challenges call for a multidimensional perspective on leadership behavior. (Top) civil service leaders need a broad repertoire of behaviours that they can translate in multiple directions.
- a contextual perspective on leadership is crucial and goes beyond differences between hierarchical levels and work domains.
- the Rijksoverheid would benefit from structural examination of differences in experiences between managers and employees (differences between intended and perceived leadership). This also means attention and space for psychological safety, preconditions, and reflection.

The Leiden Leadership Centre (Leiden University) shows that civil servants can learn a lot from each other when it comes to using their repertoire of leadership behavior. The *new Visie op publiek leiderschap* of Bureau Algemene Bestuursdienst will offer tools to stimulate this debate on leadership in the Rijksoverheid.

Want to read more?

This report is the second deliverable of the Leiden Leadership Centre (Leiden University) and follows the literature review report. Both reports are evidence-based resources for the new *Visie op publiek leiderschap* of Bureau Algemene Bestuursdienst. They also provide the groundwork for an essay that the Leiden Leadership Centre (Leiden University) will publish at the end of the research project. This essay will provide an academic reflection on the main leadership challenges in the Rijksoverheid.

Read more about this project on the [Algemene Bestuursdienst website](#).

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