

## CULTURAL PERCEPTIONS ON LEADERSHIP IN THE ROMANIAN PUBLIC SECTOR MARKETING: INSIGHTS FROM LITERATURE

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### Abstract:

This paper aims to go deeper from a marketing view in the knowledge of the role of leadership in the Romanian public sector, that is, public marketing leadership. We should note that currently there is quite a great discrepancy between the way the public sector is perceived and how the national interest should be considered either nowadays or in the future. Romanian society is becoming more diverse while the meaning and use of concepts are being adapted to their application in a more flexible public context. Taking into consideration the last three decades of New Public Management (NPM) reforms, both marketing and leadership are getting a new meaning in public institutions.

At the intended purpose a review on existing literature has been conducted, with a special focus on specific empirical researches and comparative case-study examples.

**Keywords:** *leadership; public sector; public sector marketing; public sector reform*

## PERCEPCIONES CULTURALES DEL LIDERAZGO EN EL MARKETING DEL SECTOR PÚBLICO RUMANO: PERCEPCIONES A PARTIR DE LA LITERATURA

### Resumen:

Este artículo pretende profundizar desde el punto de vista del marketing en el conocimiento del papel del liderazgo en el sector público rumano, esto es, el liderazgo del marketing público. Debe señalarse que actualmente hay una gran discrepancia entre la forma en que se percibe el sector público y cómo debe ser considerado el interés nacional, tanto ahora como en el futuro. La sociedad rumana es cada vez más diversa en tanto el significado y uso de los conceptos se adaptan para su aplicación en un contexto público más flexible. Teniendo en cuenta las últimas tres décadas de reformas de Nueva Gestión Pública (NGP), liderazgo y marketing están logrando un nuevo significado en las instituciones públicas.

Con este propósito se ha realizado una revisión de la literatura existente, con un especial énfasis en los ejemplos específicos de estudios empíricos y casos de estudio comparativos.

**Palabras clave:** *liderazgo; sector público; marketing del sector público; reforma del sector público*

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## 1. Introduction

There is a great interest on the concept of *leadership*, especially in private sector organizations, with countless research done regarding its influence on organizational performance. It has been understood in terms of traits, qualities, the situation in which the leader exists, the behaviour of the leaders, influence, social interaction patterns, role relationships, power and/or administrative positions (e.g. Blake et al. 1964; Fiedler 1967; House and Mitchell 1974; Bass 1985; Yukl, 1994). It was even suggested that there are almost as many definitions of leadership as persons attempting to define the concept (Stogdill 1974).

A number of theoretical approaches on the topic have also been developed. Specifically, Horner (1997) argues that most of these theories of leadership consider it as a process in which leaders do not lead the followers, but are seen as more of a member of a community of practice. Table 1 provides a summary of the terms used by different authors to describe the roles of leadership.

At any case, the meaning and use of the concept change when it is applied in a public context, just similarly as in case of the concept of marketing. Public organizations are significantly different from private ones in terms of intended goals and their external environment (but not only). Thus, both leadership and marketing have to be adequately considered in their “public” context (Tigānaş et al. 2011). In this sense, and even when in the past marketing has been conventionally perceived by public servants as, at best, irrelevant or, at worst, antipathetic to the delivery of public services (Laing and McKee 2001), reforms undertaken in the eighties and broadly encompassed under the term of New Public Management (NPM) have clearly contributed to change the situation.

To be precise, adopting private inspired approaches in management and delivery of public service has inherently brought more attention to the concept of marketing and its significance for the public sector (Laing 2003). Another issue brought by the reforming movements was a different approach to public administration altogether, a more flexible, open, close to citizens’ administration, capable of doing more with less, and responding to the changing context (Tigānaş et al. 2011). This means a new type of leadership, different from the traditional bureaucratic approach. It is in this view that we feel leadership and marketing are indirectly linked, as part of a comprehensive change of the public sector that has been taking place in the last three decades.

The role of the leader is usually much more focused on people rather than on the task. Internally, the important needs of coaching, motivating and developing are emphasized (Van Dorpe et al. 2011). It is the internal part of relations-oriented management what focuses on a supportive leadership style (Fernández et al. 2010). People-oriented behaviours are critical for leaders, including roles which deal with issues as consulting, team-building and conflict resolution. Leaders understand that the work of the organization is done by subordinates who are a critical resource for the conjoint success of the body and must be nurtured as much as possible. Externally, the role of leader is related to the establishment and development of good relationships with outside groups and cooperative partnerships (Van Wart et al. 2012). Both the internal and external dimensions of leadership lead to a collaborative style.

**Table 1.** Leadership roles as emphasized by different scholars

Author/s	Hierarchical leadership		Market leadership		Network leadership	
	Bureaucrat	Steward	Manager	Entrepreneur	Leader	Professional
Denis et al. (2007)		Stewardship		Entrepreneurial (transformational)		
Frederickson and Matkin (2007)				Change agent	Gardener	
Uhl-Bien et al. (2007)	Administrative leadership			Adaptive leadership	Enabling leadership	
Fernández et al. (2010)		Diversity-oriented leadership	Task-oriented leadership	Change-oriented leadership	Relations-oriented leadership	Integrity-oriented leadership
Steen and Van der Meer (2009)			Manager			Professional and policy advisor
Van Dorpe et al. (2011)	Bureaucrat		Manager		Leader	Professional, policy advisor

Source: Van Wart et al. (2012) and quoted contributions

On the other hand, Romanian public sector still has to fulfil numerous conditions in order to become a modern, citizen-oriented system. Adequate design and implementation of *marketing* tools and policies appears as one of the fundamental components in this process, not only in terms of their application in direct relations with citizens but also as a key component of strategic management. These issues are, of course, directly related to the leadership roles in the institutions, that is, the performance of politicians and top level civil servants who have the authority to start and implement such major changes. As NPM reforms are being implemented, public institutions are becoming more and more “business-like” in their relationships with citizens, which are now located in the focus centre. The new context provides a great opportunity for public leaders to adopt public marketing as an useful tool to promote an “open, user-friendly and close to the citizen” Administration (Țigănaș et al. 2011, p. 213).

Marketing can also be useful for public leaders when intending to promote the interests and objectives of their organizations in relation to other institutional or political stakeholders. However, the same reluctance and critiques that are put forward for adopting some specific private management “elements” seem still to prevail against adopting marketing practices.

One of these critiques adduces that, in accordance to the differences between business and public sector organizations, marketing does not have a purpose in the public arena, as both values and objectives are different. So the reluctance of public sector professionals to embrace marketing principles could be viewed as based on the perception that the public sector and the services it delivers are unique and distinctive, and an adherence of public sector professionals to established transactional conceptualizations of marketing (Laing 2003). Nevertheless, this should not mean that marketing cannot find a useful place in public sector practice, but rather that it needs to be adapted to its specific context. In fact, not few public services have gone “private” in the last three decades, either through privatization processes or public private partnerships, as well as a result of contracting out or concession practices, and in such an environment marketing application seems almost “natural”.

## **2. The development of leadership in the Romanian public sector**

According to the above considerations, we can state that the concept of leadership is neither new nor foreign to the public sector in Romania. Even more, the appropriateness of its application has been under discussion in a number of contributions in the literature. However, in Romania, the issue of leadership promotion has not been highlighted in detail.

In this sense, while defining the leaders’ role as agents of change, it has been highlighted that the importance of leadership depends on the state of the society, on the structure of the public institutions and on the type of reform that is being adopted. In other words, developing leaders seems to be more important in a diversified society than in a homogeneous one, because leaders are required to submit new values, to mediate conflicts and to create coalitions in order to support the reform; leaders are more important in a decentralized and branched administrative structure than in a centralized and hierarchical one.

As a country that has adopted the path of reform made in stages, step by step, Romania can only mobilize few leaders at the beginning. However, as the reform brings positive results and spreads in all the public administration structures, leadership is increasingly needed and sought (Abăluță 2003).

Leadership means different things to different people. In the past, the image of a leader in the public sector was mostly considered as that of a wise, paternalistic individual, who took all the decisions and conducted the service/organization all by himself (similarly as in case it was his “own” business). Such an image of leadership was based –as it usually is– on the historical requirements and on the characteristics of the society and of the governments that serve them. The society of Romania, however, is becoming more diverse and Romanian public institutions are thus becoming more and more flexible. New situations and a new context require new leaders and new leadership skills and abilities.

Leadership plays an important role in the implementation of the reform because it deals with two of the most important aspects involved: change and people. Leadership is revealed only in relationships between people and effective leaders inspire other people. A real change in public institutions implies a change in the mentality and behaviour of public employees, which means that institutions undergoing reform need leadership.

Effective leaders within public institutions can highly contribute to spread, promote and maintain the new values which are required for a successful public sector reform. While public leadership clearly involves top-technical staff in central administration, as well as the political leaders, the vision on leadership tends to become wider in the near future.

The new approach includes additional leaders who should perform as agents of change spread amongst public organizations to continue the reform process. Public leaders will show their effectiveness by their ability to persuade and motivate other public servants and to direct their efforts towards a common cause.

However, we should note that Romania has not set up a systematic strategy for the development of public leadership as part of the reform process, just as in case of other countries, while some developed countries began to develop it already years ago (Abăluță 2003).

In this country, real possibilities (and potentialities) of leadership application can be considered to be on the periphery of the debate, both –and even– in private companies and in public institutions. Just to put an example, the KRW International consulting company conducted a research in partnership with the Romanian-American Centre of Excellence in Business about the perception of the concept in Romania (Lazăr 2004), revealing that both the Romanian companies and the Romanian administrative environment hardly internalize this concept because of the state of dominant conservatism in the mentality. The authors of the study show that a leadership position was a synonymous of an individual having privileges and then taking responsibility. The obtained results also suggested that Romanian people working in companies and in the public sector scarcely discuss about this concept.

The absence of a functioning internal communication and the fact that private and public Romanian managers are afraid to delegate powers (understood by them as a delegation, assignment of privileges), engaging more in solving the tasks of their subordinates and less in their coordination, were background explanations of the low development of the leadership in the country.

Still, as reiterated, the pressures of the society, economy and external environment on the public sector require more and more awareness of changes are needed at all levels in public bodies. So a strong emphasis should be put on developing leadership capacities, just as previous public management approaches which were prevalent in administrative theories emphasized issues as systems, hierarchy or processes.

The “key” question to be solved refers to the way we can face all this. According to the results from the study, up to eight aspects related to the promotion of leadership can be highlighted (Lazăr 2004):

- The selection of leaders for public functions who dispose, besides the professional experience, of real human, spiritual qualities, and whose action is based mainly on values.
- The attainment of permanent partnerships with nongovernmental and private organizations, identifying and valuing the benefits of derived experience.
- The clarification of the responsibilities of the political and administrative factor in the processes related to public sector management, including a political-administrative partnership focused on results.
- The review of the way in which performance contracts are introduced in the public sector, but allowing leaders to impose their vision on the development of the respective activity, targeting long-term results.
- Those who are selected to exercise leadership in the public sector should be credited with trust for a period of time enough to allow them to implement their vision. In this respect the function of public sector leadership should be differentiated from the function of public sector management.
- Planning the succession of the leadership careers through “mentoring mentoring programs” conducted with the contribution of those with leading experience, holders of special skills, for the young leaders. At this purpose, a real and effective partnership between the public sector institutions and universities and specialized institutes would be clearly useful, promoting real opportunities –of internships in important positions– for young leaders with potential, in order to assess their skills and abilities in real practice, so aiming their better knowledge and understanding of the valences and dimensions of the public sector.
- Encouraging the competition for quality of Administration inside the public sector and, at the same time, in its relationships with the private and the nongovernmental sectors.

- Placing the idea of responsibility before that of hierarchy, so recreating public organizations on the basis of organizational principles that teach and require systems, procedures and resources compatible with the new dynamics in the organization. In other words, an organizational environment that is open to innovation and, specifically, to the development of the leadership potential at all levels.

Regarding the status of the leaders within the public organizations we find a consistent set of “myths”, including statements as the decision making is rational, leaders control all aspects of the organizational life, they develop coherent strategies, they deal with all problems that occur, they benefit from complex and efficient computerized information systems and from competent advisors, etc. In fact, the issues of leadership and marketing application in public organizations does not lie within such an orderly and predictable context as it could be expected, but the characteristics of leadership approaches in public institutions are much more prosaic. Decisions are often reactive and based on intuition and experience, while the agenda of responsible individuals is overcrowded with loads of minor (detail) tasks, then putting strategic decision-making in the background. So the work of public managers tends to be much less about the elements of rationality, predictability and full control as it would be desirable.

On the other hand, it is difficult to limit the expansion of leadership only to certain levels in the hierarchy of public institutions (a position which is widespread in any society). Holding a leading position involves filling a distinct place in the organizational architecture and provides access to a kind of behaviour and approaches that are different from those of the majority of the members (obviously, as long as they are justified by the desire of the leader to meet the common interests). Such position involves responsibility and provides opportunities and benefits, and this is the reason for the increased sensitivity of this area and the permanent pressure exercised on it. In any institution of the administrative system we will meet a variety of formal leaders who have authority due to the bureaucratic tradition defined by Weber (Swedberg and Agevall 2005). Theoretically, they occupy those positions because of their proven competences, because they promote a process of rational decision, and because they comply with the legal provisions.

In another case study, conducted in 2008 by Mora the desired goal was to identify the leadership style practiced in different Transylvanian<sup>1</sup> institutions/organizations that operate in the civil services domain. The study was based on a questionnaire applied to management and executive officials over the three years period from 2005 to 2007. Respondents were actively occupying in City Halls, County Councils, Prefectures, the Regional Training Centre for Local Public Administration, and decentralized public institutions of the public administration.

Obtained results showed that the leadership style practiced in the above institutions and organizations was an authoritarian one. Thus, these findings pointed to respondents performed a management role close to that of compromise. There were also situational aspects that influenced the managerial behaviour of the persons occupying management positions. One of them was due to the specific characteristics of the concrete institution working in the public domain. Conclusions suggested that in the case of public bodies the hierarchical organization governed by strict legal provisions may influence the style of leadership practiced. On the other hand, it was also found that there were other aspects influencing the managerial behaviour, as those related to the degree of maturity of the subordinated persons, the degree of responsibility of the leader and the leader's philosophy about people.

Another conclusion concerned the leaders' performance. So far, the previous attempts to identify a leadership style appropriate for all situations that could be faced at work had failed. Although behavioural theories had attempted to demonstrate that the democratic style was more effective than the authoritarian one (criticizing the latter), empirical studies have shown that this one may result in some cases –those of crisis situations– more efficient than the democratic one.

### **3. Promoting public marketing in the Romanian public sector**

In another study, conducted in 2011 by Tigănaş et al., the desired goal was to identify the marketing use in public organizations. By using a qualitative research method based on document analysis, these authors tried to identify within each institution included in the research whether practices related to public marketing existed or not. To better measure and analyse the concept of public marketing, several indicators were chosen, consisting in presence of budgets allocated to marketing initiatives, activity

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<sup>1</sup> Transylvania Region occupies the Central and North-Western part of current Romanian territory.

reports and/or public marketing objectives. Intended goals also included the definition of guidelines for a complete data base classifying institutions on the criterion of hired personnel or even specific departments with marketing responsibilities.

According to their first research hypothesis, authors suggested that public organizations in Romanian North-Western Region had no institutionalized public marketing activity. Studying each organisational chart received, it was found that 71% of the institutions replying the request on information had neither departments or offices nor employees carrying on public marketing responsibilities. This percent was considered relevant enough to confirm the above enounced hypothesis at the study sample level.

According to their second hypothesis, Tigănaş and his co-authors claimed that public organizations in the Transylvania Region did not allocate formal budgets for public marketing activities. After analysing public budgets of all considered institutions for the period 2008-2011, it was concluded that 80% of the replying institutions had neither 2011 financial predictions for public marketing activities nor 2008-2010 budgets allocated to this purpose. So the obtained percentages also confirmed the second suggested hypothesis. Finally, the third research hypothesis stated that Romanian public organisations in the reference Region had no objectives including public marketing elements. Therefore, those institutions missed strategic and operational aims in this field. The percentage of replying organisations without public marketing aims was 80%, which also confirmed the last hypothesis.

Through the discussion on obtained data and subsequent hypotheses confrontation Tigănaş et al. (2011) underlined the large number of Romanian public organisations unable to fulfil some basic public marketing conditions. Specifically, they considered that elements as organisational structures, financial concerns, goals and activities performed as relevant items in order to measure the quality of public marketing within public organisations. However, as indicated by the authors, findings can't be generalized neither at national nor even at regional level (i.e. the whole group of Northern-Western counties) because of the multiple case-study approach that was followed. Nevertheless, this methodological approach is illustrative contributing proofs on acceptance or not of marketing practices in public organizations as a managerial tool.

Some concrete remarkable findings from this research include: i) evidence of little openness of public institutions towards citizens<sup>2</sup>; ii) little or no personnel specifically with marketing tasks<sup>3</sup>; and iii) low budget allocation for marketing activities<sup>4</sup>.

#### 4. Discussion on findings and conclusions

On the basis of the considered studies, it is possible to conclude a set of general statements on issues related to organizational development as part of the management reform in the Romanian public administration, as follows:

- Though the public administration leaders are showing interest in the quality of the intended goals (as well as, of course, in achieving them), Romanian public institutions are still deeply suffering in terms of the ability to define a coherent system of strategic planning, which is essential in terms of organizational development. However, when considering the results from the organizational diagnosis that was made in 2007, positive changes in the structure of the strategic planning process can be appreciated.
- Regarding the ability to define operational goals, either at individual level or at the level of administrative units, although recognized at the management level, is still suffering. The degree of internalisation of the goals among officials is often low and the ability to adapt of the organizational structures to strategic goals and objectives should clearly be improved.

<sup>2</sup> According to these authors, the fact that only half of the intended public organizations reacted positively to their request on public information provision indicates that awareness regarding the importance of transparency and openness towards the public was not sufficiently developed. One explanation could be that this type of requests were not considered of first importance. These evidences, along with other results, pointed to the conclusion that public organizations analysed were not yet prepared to adopt a marketing focus in their activities and, specifically, their relationships with citizens.

<sup>3</sup> An analysis of the formal job descriptions showed that only some 30% of the institutions had at least one person with marketing responsibilities. This evidence also pointed to the conclusion that public institutions did not see marketing as a top priority.

<sup>4</sup> In some 80% of cases there was very little or no formal budgetary allocation for marketing activities in the last 3 years, which was translated in little or no marketing activities and no presence of clear marketing objectives.

- When aiming the identification of potential leaders, public institutions should define an effective method to assess leadership skills on the existing staff. An alternative would be recruiting future leaders among salient graduates from the different universities in the country.
- Encouraging, motivating and training activities are important for the leadership development, once the appropriate individuals or candidates have been identified. A monitoring system on leadership preparation programmes should ensure increased responsibilities for those in charge of developing the new generations of leaders. The importance of the continuing training of the future leaders should not be underestimated.
- The design and establishment of a system of correspondence between the performance and the rewards obtained for a better leadership should encourage public officials to better fulfil their duties and responsibilities and to achieve their full potential, so also contributing to the sustainable efforts of the institution to develop future leaders.

In front of the challenges and opportunities brought by globalization, as well as of the rapid evolution of technology, demographic changes, rising expectations of citizens and competition from the private sector, the Romanian Government should learn to continue the exploration and exploitation of new ways to improve the situation of the public administration in the country. Romania must call upon internal and international organizations that are prepared to use their ideas in a unique perspective in order to assist the civil servants to identify the new opportunities of the public administration.

Just to summarize, an effective application of leadership and public marketing principles depends crucially on the interaction between those who take responsibility for achieving the objectives of the organization, the recognition of the need of interventions in the management area, and the effectiveness of subsequent changes. All these elements become essential issues for implementation of leadership.

From the conclusions in the considered case studies we can notice that public administration leaders have as their main role solving problems and challenges that arise in the organizational environment of each institution. What is desirable for the public administration is to include people who are able to promote institutional adaptations for the public interest. Leadership plays an integral role among the resources of management in an institution, together with the recruitment and selection processes, the training and development procedures, the managerial performance, the consideration of work ethics in the public service and others.

Another consequence of obtained conclusions is that, due to the different values and basic beliefs of different societies, leadership, marketing and the public sector are inevitably anchored from a cultural view. This points to the need for the existence of a good interaction and link, in order to achieve homogeneity and correlation of activities aiming the common objective of modernizing the public sector.

In the concrete case of Romania, the public administration is under pressure to improve the provision of civil services and to develop a more effective cooperation with citizens and business and nonprofit organizations. Therefore, there is an increasing demand for leaders who are able to meet the challenges arising in the public sector leadership and to carry out these tasks for the reform of the leading system through a profound change.

However, at the moment the public sector in Romania does not have a good diagnosis of the strengths and weaknesses of its leadership and marketing capabilities. The fact that this analysis does not exist suggests that the leadership in the public sector needs still time to be developed. In order to improve the effective application of leadership and marketing principles in the public sector, two major challenges must be met, and so: i) the operating environment should promote a leadership based on a structure and culture of the public sector which should not limit and restrain the leaders who will develop a good quality leadership; and ii) the provision of efficient leaders must be improved, both from current staffs of public servants and from outside the public sector, where leaders will be attracted by the new perspectives to develop their professional careers.

It should be therefore noticed that overcoming the resistance to change manifested in the public sector in Romania is a process that will take place in several stages, with consequences on the entire public system. Although these strategies are called differently by different theorists, it should be also noted that none of these guarantees one hundred per cent the avoidance of the resistance created by the changes imposed, and so we believe that they could be more successful when combined and methodically adapted to the particularities of situations in practice.

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