Mission

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BLAMELESS BEHAVIOUR, MANAGEMENT AND PERFORMANCE
OF EUROPEAN PUBLIC TOP MANAGERS

Nunzio Casalino - Adam Steinhouse*

ABSTRACT: Skills, blameless behaviour and performances of public top managers are critical for the success both of the general performance of public administration and of public administration reform attempts. With national policy making becoming increasingly complex and ever more exposed to international co-ordination, as is the case in all EU Member States, the need is all the greater for top public managers with a broad perspective and the ability to co-ordinate their work with both national and international institutions. The European Senior Civil Servant project was an innovative model of trans-national networking and the exchange of best practice, thanks to the active involvement of European schools and institutes of public administration. This essay identifies the benefits and effectiveness of the introduction of a mix of methodologies, including the use of e-learning, and concludes that this mix could improve the training process of all European senior civil servants.


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The manuscript is the result of joint observations of the two authors. They contributed equally to this work.
1. Many reforms in public administration in the past have led to changes in the role, position, organisation and steering of senior civil servants or public top managers. Owing to decentralisation and globalisation, and to the introduction of other management philosophies, their responsibilities and the competences required of them have changed. Competition with the private market, the increased importance of customer and/or citizen orientation, better quality public services1, the need for permanent change all demand strong strategic and operational top management2.

Senior civil servants have to develop into leaders. They should be able to lead innovation and change, to communicate effectively and work in permanent dialogue with all stakeholders3, to manage the human and financial resources and processes4, and to achieve the agreed results.

Reaction and learning are studied as major indicators of training outcomes; however, these variables are not the appropriate indicators of the final desired outcome of training programs. An appropriate evaluation of training outcomes5 is made by measuring changes in job performance6 and relating it to measurements of achievement of learning goals.

The civil servants’ learning must turn from the traditional education methods to modern education methods. Therefore, this article tries to identify and describe the benefits of the introduction of a mix of methodologies to improve the training process of European senior civil servants/top managers7. It describes the results and the organisational impact of a course programme combining one month of e-learning

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1 See DEMMKE, C., & HENOKL, T. 2008. What are Public Services Good at?, Study commissioned by the Slovenian EU presidency.
courses and one week of in-class courses. For each didactic module, the e-learning phase provided general training contents to reinforce participants’ background as a pre-requisite for in-class sessions. If we think of life-long training for civil servants, one of the most important points is to find an effective learning method. Learning is not simply a matter of adding one piece of knowledge to another; there are many ways of learning, which must take into account specific needs and approaches⁸.

Training is required to improve the knowledge, skills and attitudes of civil servants at all levels, including central, regional, departmental, bureau and sectional⁹. To obtain these skills, officials can participate in training activities at schools of administration, executive leadership academies or other training organisations approved by human resource departments. In the ESCS - European Senior Civil Servant project, an analysis of the main drivers to introduce a real change in the field of public administration¹⁰ was undertaken. We looked at the political, economic, social, legal and environmental contexts of public administration in order to develop and implement an accurate training strategy. The following factors were identified to improve the training activities:

**Political factors:**
- commitment to create a modern European public administration to support social and economic development;
- new relationships¹¹ established between national civil servants in the EU context;

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reformandinstitutionbuildingofwhichlearninganddevelopmentisan
importantsub-component;
absenceofacivilservicewidehumanresourcestrategyondpolicyasa
frameworkforlearninganddevelopment.

Economic factors:
- resource constraints owing to the new macro-economic situation;
- an expected cut in national and European funds.

Social factors:
- higher incentives for self-development;
- opportunities for civil servants to meet international best practices in public
  administration;
- implementing real change management;
- lack of embedded management culture in public administrations;
- transferability of public administration approaches to other situations;
- exchange of knowledge and individual experiences between civil servants;
- low status and acceptability of training and viewed as additional to day-to-
  day work.

Legal and environmental factors:
- traditions of a law-based approach to public administration;
- primacy of regulations in determining public administration competences;
- lack of dedicated training infrastructure.

The ESCS - European Senior Civil Servant project featured a pilot phase of one
year in order to demonstrate the effectiveness of the overall system (applications,
contents and organisational aspects) and to promote the use of e-learning in the field
of EU public administration. A scientific committee of experts was established to de-
fine guidelines for the project. The purpose of the project was to stimulate cooperation and the exchange of best practices in Europe, and to build and test an innovative model of trans-national networking, thanks to the active involvement of European schools and institutes of public administration.

2. In general, there are two types of employment systems: career-based and position-based. The career-based civil service system aims at building a coherent civil service with top executives who share the same culture, which makes working together and communication across government organisations easier and suitable\textsuperscript{12}, also favouring internal mobility.

The position-based civil service system aims to provide a wider choice of candidates, including those with specialist skills, which promotes competition, cultural renewal, and adaptation in the civil service. This system enables decentralisation, recruitment to specific competence needs in different activities, differentiation of pay and other employment conditions in accordance with the market situation, and the achievement of a strong performance-orientation.

Meanwhile, an increasing number of EU Member States are starting to combine elements of both these systems. They can be considered as mixed or hybrid systems, because the configuration of the civil services of some Member States shows a mix between the two types of system.

In reality, these employment models differ in nuance between Member States, and the grouping of countries according to one or other model can be difficult. Nonetheless, the main characteristics usually remain the same: in the career-based system, a group of candidates is recruited for a career in the civil service, and in a position-based system, candidates are selected for a particular position\textsuperscript{13}. In a hybrid


model both these elements can be present in the recruitment of civil servants. Member States were divided among the three employment models based on these criteria.

Furthermore, in many Member States the recruitment procedures and career systems for the specific target group of senior civil servants differ from the general or main employment system. To improve these aspects, the Member States with a career-based employment system are moving in the direction of a position-based system for positions in order to select candidates to a greater extent on the basis of merit and performance for short-term appointments and from outside the own organisation, corps or pools. Member States with position-based systems are tending to move elements of the system towards the career-based system in order to ensure some kind of career path for the best employees and to strengthen the corporate identity of the group\textsuperscript{14}. Collective recruitment of young trainees or internal longlists and shortlists of candidates for specific positions have been introduced and combined with the open recruitment of external applicants for specific positions.

Based on the information collected from EU Member States, several common features of the senior civil service in EU Member States can be identified which go some way to explaining the movement of convergence from one system to another.

The main common elements of employment are as follows:

- selection is less based on duration of service;
- fixed-term contracts/appointments;
- performance assessment;
- internal and external applicants;
- mobility between public organisations and between public and private organisations;

selection of candidates in accordance with their managerial skills and experience\textsuperscript{15};

- willingness to attract or retain promising employees by offering a career path;
- in-service training, e.g. on leadership, in order to strengthen corporate identity.

This means that Member States with a career-based system are choosing to limit the selection of top public managers based on duration in service, and to increase the amount of fixed-term contracts and appointments, to use performance assessments, and to open positions to external applicants with managerial skills and experience\textsuperscript{16}. At the other end, Member States with position-based systems are willing to retain the best managers and to try to find a way of offering them a career perspective and in-service development. Similar tendencies can also be seen among Member States with a hybrid system.

3. As a basis for the definition in this study, we adopted the OECD definition: “A Senior Civil Service is a structured and recognised system of personnel for the higher non-political positions in government. It is a career civil service providing people to be competitively appointed to functions that cover policy advice, operational delivery or corporate service delivery\textsuperscript{17}. The service is centrally managed through appropriate institutions and procedures, in order to provide stability and professionalism of the core group of senior civil servants, but also allowing the necessary flexibility to match changes in the composition of Government by using appropriate due processes.”


\textsuperscript{17} See OECD GOV/PGC/PEM. 2008. The Senior Civil Service in National Governments of OECD Countries, Paris.
However, several elements of this definition are misleading in that not all of them are always a part of the description in EU Member States. For example:

(a) A structured personnel system: in some EU countries, there is no structured system for higher (civil service) positions; therefore, this element should be excluded from the definition.

(b) A recognised personnel system: a recognised system can mean several kinds of recognition. The emphasis in this study should be both on the formal and informal recognition from the authorities, and a common understanding of the organisation of such a group.

(c) Higher non-political positions: by only mentioning ‘higher non-political positions’, the reader cannot understand that the focus is on management functions, which is the focus of this particular study, and not, for example, on advisors or other non-management functions.

(d) A centrally-managed service: the centralised management is only the case in very few EU Member States and, if mentioned in the definition, would exclude all the other models of organisation.

With regard to the above-mentioned points, the following definition of senior civil service will be used in this particular study, focusing on management: “Senior Civil Service is a system of personnel for high and top level management positions in the national civil service, formally or informally recognised by an authority\(^{18}\), or through a common understanding of the organisation of such a group. It is a framework of career-related development providing people to be competitively appointed to functions that cover policy advice, operational delivery or corporate service delivery”.

A global trend can be seen in public administration for countries to consider making their civil services more productive and efficient and managing them in a

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more business-like manner\textsuperscript{19}. Civil service managers play a vital role in national developments and are required for their ability to acquire special leadership skills. Owing to this particular role of senior civil servants, they should have a special status as well as special recruitment and pay conditions in addition to other support arrangements within the civil service; and on account of their different profile to that of other civil servants they need a different employment and support framework in which to work in to guarantee their better performance\textsuperscript{20}.

Normally, the senior civil service contains several levels of managers and they have to manage effectively organisational change in public administration. Therefore, they need to have a vision and strategy, strong leadership competences and people management skills, in addition to political and environmental awareness. Mid-level managers have to deal mainly with day-to-day management within the organisation and need at least general management skills\textsuperscript{21} (e.g. HRM, finance and communication, team and relation-building). Depending on their functional level and also on their role, different competences and skills are necessary for specific positions\textsuperscript{22}. All levels need to be increasingly result-oriented, in order to ensure the effective and efficient organisation of processes in the public administration and to involve all stakeholders.

As the focus of this study is on senior civil servants at the highest level, emphasis will be put on their leadership and competences. The top managers of public administrations in EU Member States and the European Commission work within a European context with an increasingly multicultural labour force. Competences related to this European context and diversity could well be needed for the success of future leaders.

\textsuperscript{19} See OECD GOV/PUMA. 2003. Managing Senior Management: Senior Civil Service Reform in OECD Member Countries, in Background note, Paris, p. 5.
4. The European Senior Civil Servant (ESCS) project aimed at improving competences, networking skills and knowledge for those officials who have regular exchanges with their European counterparts or those interested in working in the public administration of another EU Member State. This type of mobility scheme enhances career development and provides a unique experience in an international and highly professional environment. The ESCS project was operated by the Scuola Superiore della PA (SSPA, currently SNA - Scuola Nazionale dell’Amministrazione) and financed by the Italian government. It was an initiative implemented within the framework of the Agreement entitled “The promotion of coordinated initiatives to implement the Lisbon 2000 objectives for training senior civil servants from the Italian State and other European Union countries” and it followed the positive experience of the Patent Project funded by the Leonardo da Vinci programme of the European Commission, which aimed at shaping a European shared framework for the training of senior civil servants in order to promote mobility and mutual understanding.

The partners included some of the most important European schools and institutions such as:

- the Scuola Superiore della Pubblica Amministrazione - SSPA (Italy), currently SNA - Scuola Nazionale dell’Amministrazione;
- the National Centre for IT in Public Administration - CNIPA (Italy), currently AgID - Agenzia per l’Italia Digitale;
- the Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne (France);
- the Ecole Nationale d’Administration - ENA (France);
- the Bundesakademie für öffentliche Verwaltung im Bundesministerium des Innern - BAKöV (Germany);
- the National School of Public Administration - EKDDA (Greece);
the Kormányzati Személyügyi Szolgáltató és Közigazgatási Képzési Központ - KSZK (Government Centre for Public Administration and Human Resource Services) (Hungary);

- the Krajowa Szkola Administracji Publicznej - KSAP (Poland);

- the National School of Government (UK).

On the basis of the “scientific curriculum of the European senior civil servant”, developed by a scientific committee of experts, a pilot training programme for civil servants of EU member countries was implemented and tested. The first pilot training course was held at the Reggia Palace in Caserta, with a class composed of 30 participants from the partner countries. The class comprised senior middle-rank civil servants from European national public administrations wishing to sign up for mobility initiatives within European Union countries. The training programme was defined to reach the following learning outcomes:

- shared knowledge\(^{23}\), key skills and competences needed to collaborate with EU colleagues;

- specific knowledge of each country. The pilot course focused on 4 countries (IT, PL, UK, F);

- each module was taught by the partner school which had developed it.

Training was delivered in English by high-level lecturers and experts from different European backgrounds. A final certificate, recognised and validated\(^{24}\) by the project partners through a memorandum of understanding, and bearing their respective logos, was delivered at the end of the course by the Italian Minister for Reform and Innovation in Public Administration.

The SSPA adopted a basic e-learning platform and a blended learning method. Both e-learning and traditional classroom teaching have their respective advantages and disadvantages, and the appropriate teaching mode is dependent on different


training courses and training objects\textsuperscript{25}. The civil servants’ training covered both basic theoretical contents and case studies\textsuperscript{26}, and was suitable for a blended learning approach. The main objectives of the course were:

Long-term objectives

\begin{itemize}
  \item Enhance civil servant’s mobility within European Union countries;
  \item Strengthen collaboration between EU national administrations.
\end{itemize}

Medium-term objectives

\begin{itemize}
  \item Develop shared knowledge, key skills and competences among middle rank civil servants of national public administrations;
  \item Create a basis for the possible future participation in the Leonardo Da Vinci programme financed\textsuperscript{27} by the European Commission.
\end{itemize}

Short-term objectives

\begin{itemize}
  \item Develop the scientific curriculum of the European senior civil servant;
  \item Set up a training programme for civil servants of EU member countries, based on the scientific curriculum. The training course might be re-proposed in the future by the partner Schools;
  \item Follow the positive experience of the Patent Project (Public Administration Training European Network for the Harmonisation of Training Approach) funded by the Leonardo Da Vinci programme of the European Commission.
\end{itemize}

Global horizontal issues such as sustainable development and climate change, access and diversity were addressed within different working groups.

5. The choice to adopt a blended approach, based on in-class training and e-learning, gave extremely positive and efficient results and was highly rated by partici-


\textsuperscript{27} See LEMMA, V. 2013. The Derivatives of Italy, in Law and Economics Yearly Review, Queen Mary University, London, UK, p. 480.
pants, who were invited to assess the quality of the training through *ex ante*, *in itinere* and *ex post* evaluation forms. The results of these evaluations provided a very useful basis to improve and implement other ESCS courses in the next years.

To fulfill the objectives of the project, we tried to design and implement a training model of teaching, transferable and repeatable in different European contexts, in order to enable public top managers to acquire the shared knowledge and the necessary country-specific background to start working in a public administration in another EU member State.

The system methodology consisted on the implementation of four different subsystems: courses, teaching administration, tutoring and overall system management, as shown in figure 1.

![Figure 1: Process chart of ESCS.](image)

The mixed backgrounds and nationalities of the audience and the lecturers were an important asset. The e-learning part was delivered through a platform, created with the collaboration of CNIPA, the Italian Centre for ICT in Public Administration, and accessible through the SSPA website (platform address: http://sna.gov.it/www.sspa.it/index-p=2583.html).

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The learning platform adopted for this purpose was based on the Learning Management System (LMS) “Moodle”. With only a few modifications, this integrated system\(^\text{30}\) was adapted to the public managers’ needs.

The e-learning contents included mainly text material. Before the beginning of the course, the tutor sent to each participant an e-mail containing the access ID and password as well as all the necessary instructions for accessing the platform. User accounts were created by the platform administrator for participants, lecturers, staff and tutors. The language chosen for communication between participants, lecturers and tutors was English. The tutor followed the progress made by each participant in the e-learning course and maintained direct and regular contact with them by e-mail.

A pre-assessment quiz, an intermediate questionnaire and a final test were prepared in order to assess participants’ knowledge before, during and after the e-learning. The tests were performed on-line by the participants. Regular contact between the tutor and the users was maintained in order to exchange several information related to the overall implementation of the pilot course, to the individual protected access\(^\text{31}\) to the platform by each participant and to the tuning of the e-learning contents and platform. Moreover, a forum was created for each module in order to enable participants to interact with the tutor and the teaching staff on spe-


cific contents. The contents of the platform were interactive\textsuperscript{32}, with full tutorial assistance available for users, who had the possibility to interact via a “forum café” and a “technical forum”.

There was also a "news forum" for useful information. As far as the functionality of the platform was concerned, interaction modalities proved to be quite efficient and immediate and the quick and simple description of the resources provided through a video tutorial was quite useful. From the evaluation questionnaires, it emerged that the e-learning contents were rated, on the whole, as efficient, exhaustive, relevant and consistent with the in-class contents.

Following the blended learning approach, the in-class part of the course aimed at providing a more in-depth insight of the topics tackled in the e-learning part. A third level included country specific parts. For these sessions, participants were divided into three groups in different classrooms. In-class training was organised into six-hour teaching days. Participants were asked to fill-in evaluation questionnaires at the end of each training day and at the end of the course in order to produce an exhaustive feedback on the overall course organisation and the knowledge acquired.

6. As shown by the overall active participation during the implementation of the course, the selection procedure proved to be valid and it would be advisable to adopt the same methods in the future.

Possible improvements in this respect may include for instance more complete information on the course and selection procedures (indicating clearly the selection criteria) through the central website. It was possible to identify some suggestions for improving the learning methods such as:

- the e-learning contents could be completed with other material based on different media (software or links to relevant websites presenting statistics or economic data of interest\textsuperscript{33}, slides or data to be examined during the in-


class sessions, videos presenting in-depth analysis or practical cases) available in streaming or download mode. The resources needed in this respect are quite reasonable for very good results in terms of quality, processing and connection times;

- a better way to contact the tutor for a more immediate interaction (in the current version, the tutor could be contacted only by e-mail);
- extension of the length of the e-learning course to two months. Many participants claimed in their evaluation questionnaires to have faced time pressures to follow thoroughly and carefully the e-learning modules;
- introduction of more immediate communication tools\textsuperscript{34} in order to establish a direct line between tutor, participants, staff and lecturers (chat, wiki, etc.) and obtain a major involvement (full immersion);
- introduction of a scheduling function or “to do list” in order to provide information related to training activities or deepening;
- improvement of the monitoring and reporting features (progress report) in order to provide participants with a detailed list of topics/lessons and the scores obtained in tests and exercises;
- elimination of the automatic transfer of messages from the technical forum to the whole list of platform users (spam effect).
- daily in-class training could be re-organised to lay greater stress on practical exercises;
- splitting the group of participants into country-specific sub-groups left a sense of incompleteness to some delegates, who expressed the need to have a final plenary session for a general review of the topics. Many participants were in fact interested in gaining an insight into all three countries studied.

Participants appreciated the practical approach adopted as well as the use of case studies, exercises, role-playing and team working activities. The methodology of the project involved a mix of public administration objectives, information systems\(^{35}\) and organisational aspects.

The main modules adopted for the online and in-class training activities were:

**European Integration and EU institutions:**
- The historical origins of the EU;
- EU policy areas and EU enlargement;
- EU legal framework;
- EU decision making procedures;
- EU effective networking and lobbying.

**EU Legal Framework and Country-specific:**
- Political institution and legal framework;
- Public administration and coordination;
- Political role and legislative process;
- Coordination with EU laws;
- Public administration: legal power and civil service legal status;
- Policy making decision and implementation;
- Civil servant role in the process of implementation;
- Explanation of professional skills for government.

**Managerial tools and behaviour:**
- Change management;
- Motivating and coaching people;
- Cross-cultural and diversity management.

**Ethics:**
- Introduction to ethical reasoning;

Typical cases of ethical conflict in public administration.

Statistics:
- How to read a statistical document;
- How to perform statistical comparisons;
- How to perform statistical analyses.

Economics – general training:
- Principles of EU economic policy;
- European monetary integration;
- Current issues of economic policy in the EU;
- Competition policies in the EU and its member States;
- The Lisbon process;
- Countries economic outlook;
- Key institutions;
- Institutions and regulatory framework;
- Policy issues.

The evaluation was made after the e-learning modules, during and after the in-class modules. Participants were asked to indicate how far they agreed or disagreed with the following statements:
- if they learned new ideas or skills (or both) by attending the blended course;
- if they learned something that they could definitely use in their day-to-day work;
- if they learned something new from talking to other colleagues;
- if they learned things which could help them in the long term.

Participants were asked also to rate the training course modules in their features:
- relevance of the topic covered;
- in-depth analysis of the topic;
- effectiveness of the presentations;

efficiency and relevance of didactical tools;
balance between theory and practice;
involvement in the didactical activity;
training materials/hand-outs used;
interaction with other course participants.

After the pre-assessment phase, the learning results were very enthusiastic and the rate of the attendance was very high.

The main aspects emerging from daily evaluation forms were the positive rating of the topics and the benefit of the modules. The final questionnaire aimed at evaluating the overall satisfaction, the attainment of the course objectives and of personal training goals. As a whole, participants gave a very positive feedback. Other questions more strictly related to the course organisation and the services provided (course administration, venue, catering and accommodation) were also included. These aspects were rated positively by participants and they give to coordinator other suggestions to improve learning experience and contents.

7. It is generally accepted that, in order to compete in today’s complex and rapidly changing world, civil servants will need continuous access to learning resources throughout their entire working lives. Increased competition and financial limitations increase the pressure for flexible learning to become an essential ingredient of educational policy. The purpose of the ESCS project was to develop shared knowledge, to update knowledge, to improve skills and competences among middle rank civil servants of EU member state public administrations in order to increase collaboration and mobility within European Union countries. Flexible learning methods,

usually, give more attention to the learning process\textsuperscript{39}, the ability to learn, the need to learn rather than the acquisition of knowledge itself\textsuperscript{40}. Therefore, they need active learners to solve problems, analyse information, and take decisions.

One of the solutions is to provide civil servants with blended learning courses and self-teaching packages to enable them to acquire more competencies and added capacities to adapt to the changing work environment.

\textsuperscript{39} See STEINHOUSE, A. 2014. The relationship between the UK civil service and research: Reforms from Blair to Cameron, in Télescope, Actes du colloque - Quelles recherches pour quelle action publique? Les défis d’une prise de décision mieux informée, Quebec City, 27 September 2013, pp. 101-112.

\textsuperscript{40} See ROSSIGNOLI, C. 1996. Il ruolo dell’IT e del facility management nel conseguimento del vantaggio competitivo, in Problemi di gestione dell’impresa, 21.