

# Leadership in Public Sector Business Process Management Initiatives—A Developing Country Perspective

Rehan Syed<sup>1</sup> [0000-0003-0415-1335]

<sup>1</sup> Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia  
r.syed@qut.edu.au

## 1 Background

Developing countries have shown a keen interest in process improvement reforms since the 1980s to redefine organisational structures, and to reduce the cost of operations. Governments in the developing world utilise Business Process Management (BPM) and its variants (i.e. Government Process Reengineering) to address the ever-growing public demand for efficient processes and service delivery. However, the successful implementation of BPM initiatives has been a continuing challenge within the public sector of developing countries, with an approximate failure rate of 85%. Still, governments and donor agencies invest billions of dollars to support these transformation initiatives.

Critical success factors in the public-sector developing country contexts have pointed to top management support and leadership as key elements of success. While leadership is a well-defined discipline, a clear and theoretically grounded definition of leadership in BPM is to date absent. The current research on BPM, though stressing the significance on the need for effective leadership, provides very limited understanding of the nature, definition, and properties of leadership in BPM.

This study investigated the role of leadership in BPM initiatives in public sector organisations in developing countries. The theoretical foundations of this study were built upon the Actor-Network Theory (ANT) [1] to explore leadership actions and contextual influences and the Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT) [2] to explain the leadership actions and their interrelationships.

## 2 Methodology

This study followed an evolutionary design with two phases. Phase 1 of the research design aimed to understand the problem context and build the initial problem statement, identify relevant literature to discover knowledge gaps and to develop principal research questions. In Phase 2, two preliminary case studies (a successful case and a failed case) were conducted to explore the local context and to report on the nature of BPM initiatives in the Sri Lankan public sector. The findings discovered the complex-networked structure of different stakeholders, further confirming the vital importance of

leadership in public sector BPM, and facilitated to identify suitable theoretical lenses (ANT and CLT). In Phase 3, a further exploratory multiple case study methodology was used. Two in-depth case studies of successful Sri Lankan government BPM implementations were used as revelatory, rich sources of evidence to identify leaders and their actions enabling successful BPM. The first case study was of an IT-enabled BPM initiative in a regional public hospital in Sri Lanka—(eDompe). The BPM initiative was to improve the efficiency of healthcare services of the hospital, and has been recognized (nationally and internationally) as a success. The second case study was of an IT-enabled BPM initiative (Electronic Document Attestation System—eDAS) in a consular services department. The BPM journey was initiated to improve the efficiency of consular services in the country, which resulted in significant positive outcomes.

Research data was collected through 19 interviews from key stakeholders from the two case organisations as well as the national ICT agency (ICTA<sup>1</sup>). Data was collected from February 2017 to July 2017. A comprehensive range of official documents (e.g. BPM design reports, issue studies, planning documents, and progress reports etc.) were also collected and analysed to augment and triangulate observations from the interviews. Interview respondents were categorised into two groups in line with ANT. **1) Focal Actors**, included the formally assigned staff (with mandated authority) who actively engaged in planning and implementation activities of the BPM initiatives, and **2) Actors**, that included the other staff in each case study.

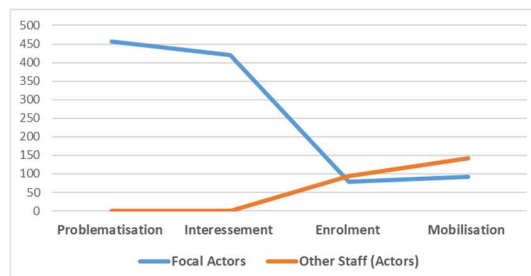
The data analysis procedure adopted a quasi-deductive method to allow the possibility of documenting new codes and themes that may emerge from the data. The data was analysed iteratively in three phases using the systematic combining approach [3]. Data was coded firstly by verbatim extraction of codes from interview data; secondly, data was analysed using the four stages of the ANT Translation Process (Problematisation, Interestment, Enrolment, and Mobilisation) [1] and; finally, thematic grouping into three leadership functions of CLT (i.e. Operational, Enabling, and Entrepreneurial leadership) [2] was done. Details pertaining to contextual factors were captured separately and analysed for each stage of the ANT Translation Process.

### 3 Summary of Findings

The findings identified a total of 42 leadership actions across the four stages of the Translation Process. The patterns identified from analysing these leadership actions that led to the effective transformation in the two cases are illustrated in Fig 1. The shift from a greater number of focal actors' leadership actions in the Problematisation stage to increased leadership actions shown by staff in the Mobilisation stage was evident in both case studies. The shift was an outcome of the focal actor's leadership actions taken to empower staff by building their confidence in the transformation initiatives. The patterns clearly show higher direct engagement in the initial two stages that gradually reduced in the last two stages of the Translation Process.

---

<sup>1</sup> Information Communication Technology Agency (ICTA) is responsible for public sector Processes and IT modernization in Sri Lanka.



**Fig. 1.** Shift in leadership interventions in the Translation Process

Given that the focal actors were officially appointed staff with administrative authority, these patterns signify the important role of mandated authority in the public sector, especially in highly bureaucratic organisations in developing countries. The lack of staff leadership actions in the first two stages, and the inclining pattern starting from the 2<sup>nd</sup> stage in both cases, is similar to the previous research [4] that explained how weak actors (staff) may take initiative and engage in innovation only when influenced by interactions with strong actors (focal actors). The focal actors blocked bureaucratic pressures, which resulted in staff demonstrating innovative behaviour, self-organising attitudes, and trust in the focal actors' interests. The results confirmed that the focal actors lead by creating a conducive environment to drive innovation and self-organisation [5]. These patterns provide new perspectives on BPM governance. BPM in general is considered as a top-down driven approach. While top management's active engagement is needed in the initial stages to drive the BPM initiatives, in order to sustain the transformation, they require collective support and leadership from other actors in a network. A continuously high intervention in all stages from the top management would restrict the organic process of bottom-up acceptance of BPM. The study findings also depicted how consensus on common goals could be achieved when multi-agency interests were effectively aligned.

The findings present BPM leadership as a dynamic and 'collective' notion; shared by a number of key players rather than being led by a single significant leader. There is a growing body of literature that views leadership with a collective-focus rather than a single 'leader' focus [e.g. 2, 6, 7]. The leadership actions jointly performed by the focal actors in the case studies, depict collectivistic leadership attributes [7] that view leadership as a network of dynamically shifting patterns of relationships involving multiple actors. This study posits that leaders in socio-technical environments like BPM should act as a 'catalyst of change'. They can achieve this by reading the complexity and emergence, and motivating and supporting actors to cross-fertilise ideas for change and innovation to emerge organically. The most effective leaders adopt a combination of different leadership types based on their needs [8].

The overall pattern presented in Fig 1 illustrates two interchangeable roles exhibited by the focal actors to stimulate innovation and encourage staff to develop their leadership and self-organisation abilities in both cases. These patterns lead to the theoretical formation of two leadership roles; "**Visible Catalysts (VC)**" and "**Invisible Enablers (IE)**". The focal actors adjusted their roles as 'VC' (higher emphasis on leadership

actions to drive change, trigger innovative ideas, challenge fundamental assumptions and policies, and build process-centric culture) to ‘**IE**’ (higher emphasis on leadership actions that support, empower and enable others to take the lead) to effectively introduce BPM in their organisations. The two roles are now explained under each stage of the Translation Process.

In the **problematisation stage**, the emphasis of the focal actors was to identify and analyse the diverse actors, their interrelationships, interests, and factors for resistance. The focal actors in both cases showed a collective behaviour in their leadership actions to define the process design, system functionalities, resource acquisition, and management of change to disrupt the status quo. The data did not identify staff exhibiting leadership behaviours in this stage in either case. We define the active roles adopted by the focal actors as **VC** to take the lead and drive the transformation initiatives.

Under the **interessement stage**, the focal actors aimed to ignite the incubation of creative ideas, and inculcate the vision and objectives of the transformation initiative within their staff by using a variety of motivational strategies. These actions led to the building of trust, effective handling of resistance to change and alignment of actors’ interests. The focal actors in this stage showed leadership actions not only to drive the transformation, but also to effectively address the administrative and bureaucratic barriers, and to provide the required resources to support the BPM initiative. The active involvement of focal actors in developing the conditions for adaptive organisation is illustrated by a balanced combination of **both VC and IE** roles to support the incubation and cross-fertilisation of ideas, motivation, and trust. As a result of these actions, the initial shift of leadership from focal actors to staff started to emerge in this stage.

The **enrolment stage** reflects the marked increase in staffs’ exhibition of leadership behaviours (i.e. by active engagement in processes, suggesting small innovations, and taking process ownership etc.). The focal actors’ roles in this phase focussed on empowering the staff, and illumination of the positive outcomes of the transformation initiative to solidify the alignment of staff’s interests with their interests. The focal actors’ actions in this stage reflected an **IE** role that helped in the stimulation of innovation and positive attitudes.

The **mobilisation stage** interestingly resulted in the emergence of self-organisation, innovation, and full acceptance of process-enabled change as an outcome of the 3 stages of the Translation Process and the effective use of leadership interventions by the focal actors. The focal actors have shown effective integration of emerging innovative ideas with the formal structure and operational policies, but a very low direct interaction with the transformation initiatives. The staff in this stage confirmed the sustainability of the network, irreversible process culture, and confidence in the focal actors to introduce BPM in their respective organisations.

This data analysis confirmed the existence of high entanglement between the **VC** and **IE** roles in both the case studies. The findings also confirmed the vital importance of the mandated authority within public sector organisations and how this authority can be effectively transformed by using the leadership functions categorised as **IE** to bring sustainable socio-technical change in public sector organisations. The findings suggest that self-organisation is driven by a well-coordinated execution of collectivistic leader-

ship actions to balance the complexities involved. The focal actors' collectivistic leadership acts as the driving force behind the staff transition from 'weak' to 'strong' agents [confirming 9], that results in self-organisation in the later phases of the Translation Process (i.e. Enrolment and Mobilisation). Hence, it can be stated that in networks initially composed of weak (reactive) agents, leadership can act as the catalyst that is needed for the network transformation to strong (proactive) agents to result in self-organisation.

## 4 Conclusion

This study attempted to address the lack of research in BPM leadership by using two revelatory case studies from public sector organisations in a developing country context. This study contributes to the theory of leadership in BPM initiatives. It provides in-depth insights and a solid basis for understanding how BPM leadership is a collective notion and how leaders can influence the complex network of stakeholders to manage the resistance to change which frequently occurs with radical process transformations. The findings of this study offer practical contributions with implications for leadership development. The leadership actions and their explanations together with the dual role of 'visible catalysts' (VC) and 'invisible enablers' (IE), provide a strong basis for understanding the developmental needs of leadership competencies for effective change in any socio-technical context.

## 5 References

1. Callon, M.: Some elements of a sociology of translation: domestication of the scallops and the fishermen of St Brieuc Bay. *The Sociological Review* 32, 196-233 (1986)
2. Uhl-Bien, M., Arena, M.: Complexity leadership: Enabling people and organizations for adaptability. *Organizational Dynamics* 46, 9-20 (2017)
3. Dubois, A., Gadde, L.-E.: "Systematic combining"-A decade later. *Journal of Business Research* 67, 1277 (2014)
4. Ramalingam, B., Jones, H., Reba, T., Young, J.: Exploring the science of complexity: Ideas and implications for development and humanitarian efforts. Overseas Development Institute London (2008)
5. Wheatley, M.: *Who Do We Choose to Be?: Facing Reality, Claiming Leadership, Restoring Sanity*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Oakland, CA (2017)
6. Carter, D.R., Dechurch, L.A.: Networks: The Way Forward for Collectivistic Leadership Research. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology* 5, 412-415 (2012)
7. Yammarino, F.J., Salas, E., Serban, A., Shirreffs, K., Shuffler, M.L.: Collectivistic Leadership Approaches: Putting the "We" in Leadership Science and Practice. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology* 5, 382-402 (2012)
8. Goleman, D.: Leadership that gets results. *Harvard Business Review* 78, 4-17 (2000)
9. Rodrigo, L.M., Montagna, J.M.: Business Process Reengineering Role in Electronic Government. *International Federation for Information Processing* 214, 77-88 (2006)