THE LEADERSHIP COMPETENCY IN VIETNAM PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

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Abstract. *Globalization and technological development have changed people's demand, which leads to many challenges for public and private sectors. Public administration can overcome the challenges by reforming their structure and performance. In this research, the authors affirmed the important roles of leaders in public administration. This research used the integrated leadership theory in the context of Vietnam public administration to build a framework of competency for leaders. The Key Informant Panel and the in-depth interview method were implemented to achieve the research objectives. Research findings have built a leadership competency framework for the public sector, which benefits both researchers and practioners. For researchers, the findings can add to leadership competency theories, especially in the public sector. For policy-makers, the findings can be solid foundations which they can rely on to work out policies for leadership development in Vietnam public sector.*

Key words: *leadership, competency, Vietnam leadership competency, public administration, leadership competency in public administration*

Introduction

Globalization and technological development have changed citizens' life and work, which has left huge impacts on many aspects of public administration. In recent years, public administration has to cope with many challenges such as openness and transparency in its operation, challenges in human service integration in public administration, the challenges in religion, spirituality and workforce in the public sector; the complexity and hybrid in public administration, the emergence of networked government, the stronger power of stakeholders (including upper-middle class, lower-middle

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class and poor citizens) who set higher demands on politicians and the public sector, and so on.

To cope with huge challenges inside and outside the public administration sector, the important role of leaders in public administration has been affirmed. Leaders in public administration have to cope with numerous difficulties, however, they are the key assets for public administration movement to overcome the challenges. Instead of ensuring that the government's rules and procedures are followed appropriately as the roles of old leaders in traditional public administration, the new public administration context requires that the leaders help define and achieve the high performance target aligned with the high requirements of citizens, enterprises and society. Another important role of leaders is to create high-quality and more efficient services for stakeholders to support the effectiveness of public administration.

With those important roles of leaders in public administration, the theory of leadership in the public sector should be improved to adapt to the rapidly-changing environment. In traditional public administration, the roles of the leaders are mostly task-oriented. However, in the new context of public administration, task-oriented approach is not enough to meet the high demand of people, they require that the leaders not only care about their tasks, but also care about the environment, their followers, the organization strategy and directions for development. In order to satisfy high requirements, leaders must possess task competency, human resource competency, management competency, etc. Thus, the competency framework for leaders in public administration has attracted more and more researchers in various fields.

In Vietnam case study, Vietnam is one of the countries that have been successful in transforming from centrally-planned economy to a socialist-oriented market economy. However, its economic growth remains modest in recent years, mostly because of the slow reform in public administration. It is a hindrance to economic and social development. In order to overcome the main obstacles in reforming public administration, many researchers, namely Quan (2015), Nha and Quan (2012), propose that the government must focus on the quality of leaders by implementing a new management approach such as a competency framework for leaders.

1. Research objectives and research questions

Many researchers have discussed the importance of leadership in the private sector and non-profit organizations, but leadership in public administration, which plays a crucial role in economic and social development, has not yet received adequate attention from scholars and practioners. Therefore, this topic should get clearer guidance from vast leadership theories.

Yukl (2012) and Park et al. (2018) affirmed the validity of the leadership competency framework in leadership performance. However, given the complexity of public administration and fast-drive changes in globalization, whether this framework is still

valid in the public sector remains an unanswered question; and if it is still valid, it is not clear how many competencies there are in the framework. Therefore, the objectives of this research are to critically examine the theory of leadership competency and present a leadership competency framework in the public sector in Vietnam. To achieve the research objectives, we reviewed integrative effective leadership, the leadership competency model in literature. We also conducted empirical research to clearly examine the leadership competency in the context of Vietnam's public sector. In doing so, the following questions were addressed:

Question 1: What kinds of competency are required for the leadership competency model?

Question 2: What kinds of leadership competency are important in the leadership competency model for Vietnam's public sector?

2. Literature review

2.1. Theoretical background

Leadership can be regarded as one of the most interesting topics that have attracted numerous scholars and practitioners because they consider leadership as a strong source for competitive advantage. Van Wart (2003) indicated that the effective leadership can enhance the company competitive advantages by providing higher quality of goods and services. Effective leadership ensures high motivation and satisfaction of employees; it also gives the followers the overarching sense of vision and mission for organizations. It encourages the mechanism for innovation and creativity. Yukl (2012) stated that leadership can influence and facilitate the followers to improve individual performance, team performance and organization performance. Thus, many scholars, practitioners and organizations have seen effective leadership as the main competitive advantage for sustainable development of the organization.

Fernandez, Cho, and Perry (2010) mentioned that leadership and leadership effectiveness theories are not adequately understood and face controversial arguments in the academic field. Thus, the researchers continue to conduct more research on the effective leadership to clarify the dark side of leadership theory. On the other side, Fernandez et al. (2010), Van Wart (2003), Trottier, Van Wart, and Wang (2008) indicated the need for rigorous empirical research on leadership in public administration because little research in this field (public administration) is found in the journals.

Public administration has many typical characteristics compared with the private sector and non-profit organizations. It leads to the different points when the scholars conduct and build the leadership theory in the public sector. Fernandez et al. (2010) showed that one of the theoretical limitations in leadership and leadership in public administration is the fragmentation of leadership theory into small clusters. With this approach, the scholars provided in-depth understanding in narrow aspects, such as

transformational leadership, transactional leadership, servant leadership, and so on. However, the audience lacks the overall view of leadership. This limitation was also found in public administration. Therefore, Fernandez et al. (2010), Van Wart (2014), Van Wart (2003) proposed that in order to gain deep understanding of leadership in public administration, scholars and researchers should develop and test the comprehensive leadership theory. Fernandez et al. (2010), Van Wart (2003) developed the comprehensive leadership model for public administration that integrates transformational leadership and transactional leadership in the situational context of public administration.

Numerous scholars, researchers were attracted to conduct studies on the integrated leadership theory in public administration. According to Van Wart (2014), leadership can be seen as the linear chain of causally-related factors. The performance of leaders is moderately impacted by their personal contributions and competency. In the same manner, Yukl (2002) proposed the integrated model of leadership which combined leadership skills, traits, behaviors and style. Besides those factors, the situational variations can be seen as factors affecting the effectiveness of leaders. The effective leadership has been built in public administration by leaders' skills, abilities, personalities, and the ways they interact with circumstances. These authors asserted the importance of the fit between the competency of leaders (skills, abilities, traits, and knowledge) and the conditions of public administration (such as political support, public demand, and so on). Another research of Riccucci (1995) found that the effective leadership in public administration competency comes from leaders' qualities (including skills, experiences, technical expertise, managerial style and personalities of the leaders) and the fit of these qualities with environmental factors (such as political situation and public demand).

2.2. Leadership competency in the public sector

Based on leadership in public administration literature review, the integrated leadership theory in public administration indicates that the successful leaders must relate to five leadership roles. These are: task-oriented leadership; relation-oriented leadership; change-oriented leadership; diversity-oriented leadership; and integrity-oriented leadership. With regard to the five leadership roles, the first three were drawn from Ohio State University and University of Michigan leadership studies (Yukl, Gordon, and Taber (2002), Lindell and Rosenqvist (1992). Yukl (2012) proposed four components of hierarchical taxonomy of leadership behavior including task-oriented; relation-oriented; change-oriented and external behavior. Other two leadership roles stem from the public administration context that was found in the research of Fernandez et al. (2010). However, the diversity–oriented leadership has been an argument to take up research. According to Richard, Barnett, Dwyer, and Chadwick (2004), the relationships of diversity and the organization performance are complex, and it is not clear whether diversity always improves organization.

In the five leadership roles, task-oriented leadership includes the type of leadership behavior that serves a function in achieving the organizational goals. Basse and Avolio (1990), Fernandez et al. (2010) and Park et al. (2018) mentioned the following activities: setting and communicating goals and performance standards; planning, directing and coordinating the activities of followers, maintaining the communication channel (formal and informal), monitoring the followers in line with the organizational goals; getting feedback from followers. Those activities can be done when the leaders in public administration have implicit competency that shows in their skills, knowledge and traits. These competencies are planning skills, communication skills, strategic thinking, evaluating and motivating employees, and result achievement. Moreover, task-orientation was transferred as part of the leadership competency model that was implemented in some countries like the Netherlands, Thailand, and Malaysia. In the research of De Beeck and Hondeghem (2010), the authors investigate competency for leaders in public administration in Belgian Federal Government and build up the model of leader competency called *The 5+1 competency* with Technical competency and Generic competency for leaders. Technical competency depends on specific industries, and generic competency consists of (1) personal effectiveness, (2) interpersonal relations, (3) dealing with tasks, (4) giving directions and leading and (5) dealing with information.

Relations-oriented leadership indicated the behavior of leaders which is related to the benefits of followers and designed to encourage the interpersonal relations among members inside and outside the organization. The leaders' behavior includes treating their subordinates equally, showing concerns about their well-being, appreciating the contributions of followers, giving subordinates chances for growing, involving subordinates in decision-making and also empowering employees. We can propose that human resource management competencies for leaders in public administration are important in order to have the effective relation-oriented performance.

According to Yukl (2002), Fernandez et al. (2010), Yukl (2012), the change-oriented leadership roles express improving strategic decisions, adjusting to changes in working environment, enhancing innovation and creativity, making major changes in the working process and showing commitment to the changes. The changes in organization become more and more important, and encouraging the organizational changes has become a critical factor for successful leaders. The public administration sector has to deal with the high pressure to work more efficiently and effectively in delivering services and implementing reforms in management by elected officials. In order to support change-oriented leadership roles, many researchers propose competencies for leaders in public administration: innovating competency, adaptability, strategic thinking and planning.

Although the diversity-oriented leadership roles emerge in the arguments of some researchers, the roles of integrity-oriented leadership are affirmed by many researchers and organizations. In the study of Fernandez et al. (2010), the authors give an example of The U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM); this organization reveals that

integrity can be seen as one of the five competency requirements for Senior Executive Service (SES). Furthermore, integrity can also be evaluated as the most important among 26 specific competencies for SES. Vietnam is one of the small nations that is successful in its transition from a centrally-planned economy to a socialist-oriented market economy. In the globalization, Vietnam has achieved the magical economic development with a high GDP growth rate each year. However, Vietnam's economy has to deal with many challenges, one of which is the public administration reform. Many studies assert the roles of leaders in public administration to encourage reformation of the public sector. With the new approach to public administration, competency-based management has been implemented in this sector in recent years with the studies of Lan and Anh (2015), Nha and Hai (2013), Nha and Quan (2012), Quan (2015).

With the trend of using competency-based management in the public sector, building the leadership competency plays an important role for implementing this method in public administration. Based on the previous research and the integrated leadership theory in public administration, the authors have synthesized the competencies for leaders in Vietnam's public administration. They are the combinations between integrated leadership theory (task-oriented, relation-oriented; change-oriented and diversity-oriented) and the context of public administration in Vietnam. Thus, we proposed four groups of competencies for leaders in public administration. They are: regional context competency (required by Vietnam public administration context); professional competency (task-oriented role); human management competency (relation- oriented role); self-development competency (change-oriented role and diversity-oriented role).

3. Methodology

3.1. Data sample

This research uses the qualitative method with the Key Informant Panel. The authors chose the expert panel including two groups with 15 experts. The first group included 3 experts from the government (Ministry of Home Affairs) and 7 experts from Hoa Binh Home Affairs Department and Son La Home Affairs Department. Four of them were Deputy Director of Home Affair Department. The second group included 5 experts who were lecturers at Thuongmai University and Vietnam National University. All of them had more than 10 years' experience teaching human resource management and they had experience in doing research on leadership, competency-based management, and leadership in public administration.

The data sample: research was conducted in 2015 in 11 provinces in Northwest area including Hoa Binh, Son La, Ha Giang, Dien Bien, Lai Chau, Cao Bang, Bac Can, Thai Nguyen, Tuyen Quang, Yen Bai, Lao Cai. All data were collected in Northwest, which is located in the mountains and has some typical characteristics of economy, society, and population. Respondents were Directors of Department, Deputy Directors of Department and Heads of Division in public administration.

TABLE 1: **Respondents' profile in the qualitative study**

Criteria	Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	375	70.89
	Female	154	29.11
Age	25–40 years old	78	14.74
	40–50 years old	205	38.75
	50–60 years old	243	45.94
	More than 60 years old	3	0.57
Education	PhD	21	3.97
	Master	86	16.26
	Bachelor	397	75.05
	High School	2	0.38
	Others	23	4.35
Years in management position at all levels	Less than 5 years	152	28.73
	5–10 years	257	48.58
	More than 10 years	120	22.68

Source: Authors (2017)

Based on the research of Fernandez et al. (2010), Nha and Quan (2012), Quan (2015), De Beeck and Hondeghem (2010) and Forgues-Savage and Wong (2010), we built the questionnaire that includes four main groups. Firstly, the competency in the regional context group includes three sub-competencies: (1) Knowledge of local culture; (2) Knowledge of strategy and policy for local development and (3) Knowledge of the local language. Secondly, the professional competency group includes: (1) Knowledge of the public administration sector; (2) Knowledge of the organization mission; (3) Building government administration document. Thirdly, the human resource management included: (1) Building relationships; (2) Training and developing employees; (3) Building workforce; (4) Evaluating employees; (5) Motivating employees. Lastly, the self-management competency includes: (1) Strategic outlook and thinking; (2) Change management; (3) Planning and Organizing; (4) Building organizational culture; (5) Delegation; (6) Decision- making; (7) Communication skill; (8) Creative thinking; (9) Continuous learning and (10) Result orientation. The authors used the Likert rating scale from 1 (strongly unnecessary) to 5 (strongly necessary). With the interval of the scale from 1 to 5, the meaning of the scale is 0.8 (Meaning of scale = (maximum - minimum)/ n).

3.2. Data analysis

In order to analyse primary data, the authors used the Key Informant Panel (sample structure in 3.1). The purpose of using the Key Informant Panel (KIP) is analyzing the necessary competency for leaders in public administration, particularly, the context of public administration in Vietnam and Northwest area. Based on the discussions, expert panel proposes the competency necessary for leaders in Vietnam public administration.

Moreover, based on the data generated from the survey, the authors used Relative Important Index (RII) for ranking the importance of competency of factors identified. The Relative Important Index (RII) is calculated using formula adopted by Fagbenle, Adeyemi, and Adesanya (2004). This method was used by Ernest, Matthew, and Samuel (2015) in social research field to find out entrepreneurial learning competencies, and by Somiah, Osei-Poku, and Aidoo (2015) to identify factors influencing unauthorized building.

$$RII = \frac{\sum Pi\ Ui}{N\ (n)}$$

RII: Relative Importance Index
Pi: Respondent rating of importance
Ui: Respondent's placing identical to weighting or rating on the importance
N: sample size
n: the highest attainable score on the importance

4. Research findings

The findings of the quantitative method are shown in Table 2. Based on the analysis, the authors chose the competency with the mean score of over 4.2 (on the scale of 4.2 to 5) because it shows that this competency is important for leaders in public administration (14 competencies of leaders in public administration were chosen).

TABLE 2: **Leader competency in public administration**

No	Competency	Number of choices					Sample (N)	Mean	RII
		1	2	3	4	5			
1	Knowledge of local culture	0	9	99	138	283	529	4.314	0.863
2	Knowledge of strategy and policy for local development	0	14	107	152	256	529	4.229	0.846
3	Knowledge of local language	6	21	273	122	107	529	3.573	0.715
4	Knowledge of the public administration sector	0	17	119	131	262	529	4.206	0.841
5	Knowledge of the organization mission	4	17	87	119	302	529	4.319	0.864
6	Building government administration document	8	48	285	118	70	529	3.367	0.673
7	Building relationships	5	16	93	121	294	529	4.291	0.858
8	Training and developing employees	0	17	112	102	298	529	4.287	0.857
9	Building workforce	17	88	305	87	32	529	3.055	0.611

TABLE 2 continued

| No	Competency	Number of choices					Sample (N)	Mean	RII
		1	2	3	4	5			
10	Evaluating employees	21	61	338	87	22	529	3.053	0.611
11	Motivating employees	1	15	119	131	263	529	4.210	0.842
12	Strategic outlook and thinking	4	14	117	98	296	529	4.263	0.853
13	Change management;	0	17	81	112	319	529	4.386	0.877
14	Planning and Organizing	3	16	61	189	260	529	4.299	0.860
15	Building organizational culture	11	16	293	91	118	529	3.546	0.709
16	Delegation	6	22	310	106	85	529	3.457	0.691
17	Decision- making	0	19	113	132	265	529	4.216	0.843
18	Communication skills	0	22	115	112	280	529	4.229	0.846
19	Creative thinking	21	43	342	85	38	529	3.144	0.629
20	Continuous learning	2	21	91	113	302	529	4.308	0.862
21	Result orientation	0	24	90	117	298	529	4.302	0.860

Source: Authors (2017)
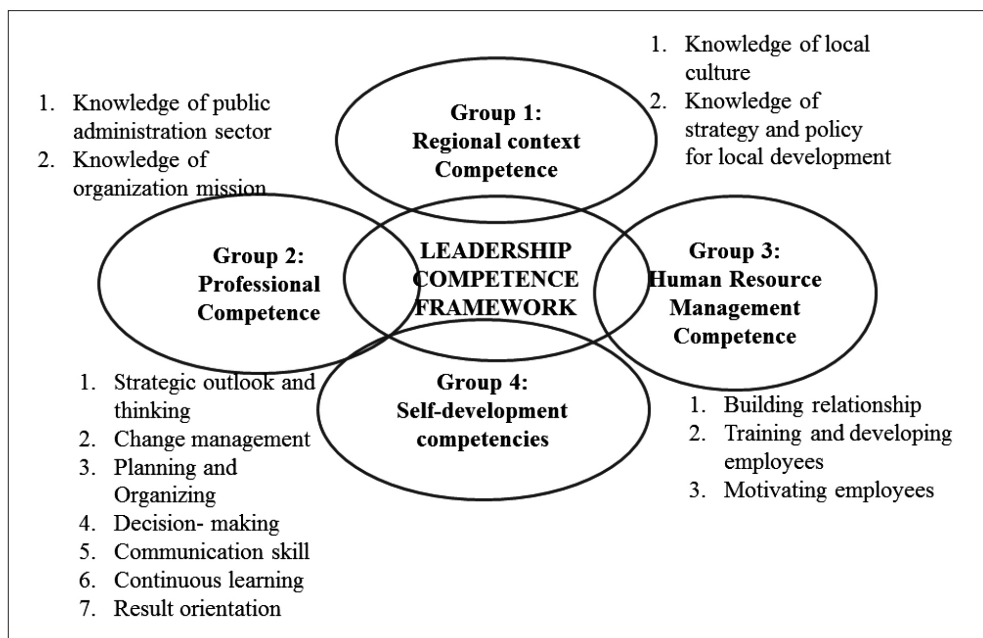
FIGURE 1: **Leadership Competency Framework for Vietnam Public Administration**

Source: Authors (2017)

Based on the analysis of the respondent data and also discussion with the experts, the authors have come up with the following findings:

Firstly, results from the experts agree with the literature review of leadership theory. These experts accept that there are four main groups of leadership competency in Vietnam public administration. The model of leadership competency was shown in Figure 1.

Secondly, the results of this research show that the leaders in Vietnam public administration (Director of Department; Deputy Director of Department and Head of Division) regard the regional context as the most important. Knowledge of local culture and Knowledge of strategy and policy for local development received high mean scores. It means that the leaders in public administration realized the strong impacts of local context on their performance. As a result, they chose high levels of importance for local context competency as part of the competency model for their performance. These ideas are agreed upon by experts in in-depth interviews because without awareness of local context, leaders in public sector cannot achieve their performance.

Thirdly, the leaders in Vietnam public sector also find that they must have the knowledge about the overall public sector and also deeply understand about their organization because the leaders realize that public administration is a huge sector with many tight relation factors. If they do not have enough knowledge about their organization or the relationship of their organization in the public administration system, it is difficult for them to succeed in their position as leaders and in career development. Experts admit that the globalization and huge impact of technology have caused fundamental changes in the public sector.

Fourthly, the analysis of leaders' competencies uncover interesting points in the case of public administration in Vietnam. The success of leaders in public administration highly depends on the performance of their followers (staff). Thus, the pivotal competency in human resource management for leaders is training and developing employees and motivating employees. Based on the leaders' training, their staff can do their tasks well and the motivations for employees help them contribute more to the success of the organization in public administration.

Last but not least, the authors find that the leaders in public administration focus more and more on the change management (mean: 4.386); this competency received the highest score. It means that fast changes have taken place in the public sector. The leaders not only adapt their ability to the high requirements of the tasks, but also they must control the changes inside and outside their organization. Besides that, the interview with experts shows another important point: the leaders understand that to become effective leaders in public administration in the global context, they should learn continuously (Continuous learning competency). They also admit the importance of personal relationships and communication skill in their tasks. The experts explain that Vietnam's culture highly appreciates the relationship in their life, and this culture also appears in their working environment. Moreover, the task of leaders in public administration

has huge impact on stakeholders. Thus, the leaders in public administration should focus more on the relationship building competency and the communication skill.

5. Conclusion

This research was conducted to fill the gap of leadership competency theory through the combination of integrated leadership theory and the context of public administration. The leadership theory was built with many approaches. Each of them contains advantages and disadvantages. In this study, the authors utilize the advantages of an integrated leadership theory (fundamentals for three of four competency groups). Furthermore, the authors propose that a completed leadership competency model in public administration must take into considerations the regional/ local context in order to identify the sub-competencies that make up the regional context competency.

In this research, based on qualitative method, the authors have built a coherent leadership competency framework in public administration. Although the competency–based management is not a new approach in human resource management field, its research in public administration still remains limited. Our research therefore can make contribution to literature on leadership in public administration as well as the reality of the public sector in Vietnam.

6. Suggestions for the further studies

Leadership competency in the public sector can be seen as a tool to build the competency-based management including recruitment and selection, evaluation, remuneration, development. This research has built the leadership competency framework with many sub-competencies but has not yet worked out the conditions to apply it in reality. Future research should therefore find out variables to successfully implement leadership competency in human resource practice so as to accelerate public administration reform.

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