

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A SUSTAINABLE PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION: TEAM-COOPERATION AND ORGANIZATIONAL SUSTAINABILITY THROUGH EMPATHY AND PROCEDURAL FAIRNESS IN TIMES OF COVID-19 DRIVEN DIGITIZATION

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Abstract

Social, political and economic crises are caused by a complex system of underlying factors. Among those, in many cases two problematic factors play a fatal role in damaging the sustainable outcome of work-processes and on the long run in even causing catastrophic events like the COVID-19 crisis: the lack of the ability to cooperate and egoistic thinking. As an important institutional actor, public administration is deeply involved in those interdependencies. The following article firstly focuses on the general conditions for cooperation among individuals and organizational sustainability. From an interdisciplinary point of view, it describes research approaches of psychology, economics and ethical leadership. And secondly it deals with the question what kind of options exist, to maintain and support intra-organizational and customer-oriented empathy and procedural fairness as cooperation's inevitable bases during this global crisis in which most interactions and administrative processes are limited to digitalized communication and meetings. The article combines the findings from the first part with new approaches from administrative practice, e-government and public administration theory. It tries to outline basic ideas to maintain a fair working culture and a professional service for citizens and to react to the risks of accelerated digitization.

Keywords: *public sector ethics, ethical leadership, team-cooperation, organizational sustainability, social psychology, behavioural economics, procedural fairness, digitization, COVID-19-crisis management*

1. Introduction

From an ethical point of view the developments of 2020 pose an enormous threat on the ideal of stable conditions in society, economy and public administration. As an important institutional stakeholder public administration is deeply involved in those interdependencies. Especially when digitization forces people to rely on technological communication channels, they should step back from time to time and be aware of the limits and risks of digitization. For example, they should still rely on the humane in humans and still take into consideration psychological aspects, especially when personal encounters and spontaneous creative processes are disturbed. Also, in times of accelerated digitization, especially cooperative working conditions und procedural fairness need to

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be fostered. And – what is more – for the perspective of public administration, both are particularly important during special projects and critical events like the COVID-19-crisis, when usual administrative routines are not always appropriate.

2. General conditions for cooperation among individuals

First of all, cooperation depends on successful communication, which is characterized by *mutual understanding* [ref. 3, p. 20] and *trust*. Secondly – as a higher form of cooperation – there can be observed an innate willingness to help in people. C. Daniel Batson has already described this in the early 1990s from the point of view of social psychology [ref. 1]. In his research he asked the question if “helping is always and exclusively motivated by the prospect of some benefit for ourselves, however subtle” or if there really exists the openness for altruistic helping in man [1, p. 1].

He coined the “*empathy-altruism-hypothesis*”: „that feeling for a person in need evokes altruistic motivation to help that person“ [1, p. 177] if the conditions determine individuals that way. This underlines human empathy as an ability, which is deeply related to the *theory of mind*, regarding the other individual not only as an object, but to see the other as similar to oneself with an own view on reality [22, p. 136]. In Batson’s view, substantiated by his empirical research, altruistic helping is not related to egoistic altruism, which certainly also exists [1, p. 2]. Batson assumes that empathy-based altruism is “a motivational state with the ultimate goal of increasing another's welfare” [1, p. 6] and that egoism is “a motivational state with the ultimate goal of increasing one's own welfare” [1, p. 7]. Also, from the point of view of social psychology, Jonathan Haidt engrosses this approach with a closer look at evolutionary origins. He regards selfishness as a part of human behaviour, but he stresses, that “human nature was also shaped as groups competed with other groups. As Darwin said long ago, the most cohesive and cooperative groups generally beat the groups of selfish individualists” [5, introduction]. In other words, human beings can cooperate and be good team players, even in correspondence with Darwin’s evolutionary theory. For different scientific fields like ethical leadership and organizational psychology this argumentation is very supportive, but Haidt also ads that this positive tendency implies one problem: this “hivishness can blind us to other moral concerns” [5, introduction]. And this can lead to in-group vs. out-group-thinking, which then is the opposite of altruism and cooperation and with regard to politics leads to ideological thinking [5, introduction]. Haidt refers to research conducted by Michael Tomasello in developmental and comparative psychology. Tomasello regards man as a “*zoon politikon*”, a social being, strongly capable to cooperate in order to reach common goals [22, p. 136]. Human beings can only fully succeed, if they cooperate, but our coexistence is not necessarily stable.

Tomasello coined the term “*shared intentionality*” [23]: Humans and other great apes share social activities and cultivate social relationships “with others psychologically via social activities that create shared experiences” [25, p. 2]. For humans this might be making music together, dancing or team sports, but also conversing or gossiping might be part of that [ref. 25, p. 2]. In a new study the authors show that toddlers and great apes alike have a “propensity to feel closer to those with whom one has shared an experience” [25, p. 2]. But “given children’s propensity to create common ground with others seemingly for its own sake in a way that apes do not – for example, in pointing things out to others via a pointing gesture just to share attention to it” can be interpreted a special human trait [25, p. 3]. For example, this common ground can be reached through exchanging eye contact while watching a video together and creating mutual understanding [ref. 25, p. 3]. The authors come to the conclusion that human beings need social activities “for creating shared common ground with

others, which serves to both create social closeness and support many further cooperative and cultural activities” [25, p. 10].

In a nutshell, sociobiological explanations and evolutionary psychology play an important role in explaining cooperation. In phylogeny and ontogeny cooperation is even older than language and not only human beings but also many other species are able to understand the intentions of other individuals to react correspondingly, they all have the ability to form a theory of mind [22, p. 136]. But what is so typical of humans, is the ability to interact with a shared intentionality [ref. 22, p. 136] and sensitivity towards common experiences which is strongly influenced for example by eye contact through social understanding and mutual closeness [ref. 25].

It can be reasoned that, with their research, Tomasello and Haidt add further ideas to Batson’s empathy-altruism hypothesis from the early 1990’s. What is more, directly shared personal experiences and goals are the fundament for mutual trust, solidarity and cooperation among individuals [ref. 7, p. 64] in groups but in whole societies as well.

3. Organizational sustainability through empathy and procedural fairness

With regard to organizational sustainability in public administration this means that mutual empathy-based cooperation among employees and between civil servants and their customers is dependent on establishing a shared intentionality. In this part I will shortly outline four different complementary theories:

In his “*x- and y-theory*” [14, p. 193ff] from the 1960s in which he identified two contrasting assumptions about human nature in a management system, Douglas McGregor rendered an important theoretical argument for the *human relations movement*. It focusses on the relations among employees and on employees and their managers from a psychological point of view and can be dated back until the 1930s. McGregor describes his theory as follows: Those who have internalised the x-theory believe that employees need to be directed, controlled and punished “to put forth adequate effort toward the achievement of organizational objectives” [14, p. 194]. It is achieved by the use of an oversimplifying combination of management by objectives, incentive systems and performance appraisal. Those assumptions undermine intrinsic motivation and cooperation among team members and even between principal and agent. McGregor contrasts this with the y-theory: Employees are used to “the expenditure to physical and mental effort”, they have a high competence in self-control “in the service of objectives”, they commit themselves to the objectives of the organization if they agree with them “under proper conditions”, they seek responsibility and the capacity to exercise a relatively high degree of imagination, ingenuity and creativity in the solution of organizational problems is widely, not narrowly, distributed in the population” [14, p. 194]. So, he concludes, if the working conditions support the positive traits in employees, the organization benefits from human openness for performance, especially if the organization’s objectives also support teamwork and cooperation.

Richard Sennett gives some further instructions from the point of view of sociology as to how procedural fairness can be reached in working practice with his description of the “*social triangle*” [21, p. 311ff]: In his view “cooperation oils the machinery of getting things done, and sharing with others can make up for what we may individually lack. Cooperation is embedded in our genes, but cannot remain stuck in routine behaviour; it needs to be developed and deepened. This is particularly true when dealing with people unlike ourselves; with them, cooperation becomes a demanding effort” [21, introduction]. In his research for this approach, he focuses on responsiveness [21, introduction], apparently very close to empathy and trustful communication.

His concept of the social triangle already has its roots in his observations of industrial work practice in Boston in the 1970s. First of all, he observed that workers grudgingly respected decent bosses and vice versa, secondly workers talked freely with one another about shared problems, and also covered for co-workers in trouble. And on the third side, when something went wrong in the shop and when necessary, they did extra hours or other people's jobs [ref. 21, p. 271]. He warns that, if informal channels of communication wither, people keep to themselves ideas about how the organization is really doing, or guard their own territory. Thus, weak social ties erode loyalty [ref. 21, p. 271f]. Only in working environments with a healthy informal communication culture and enough space for civility the social triangle can thrive.²

Apparently, for sustainable success of an organization, good leadership is necessary. Jonathan Haidt focusses on ethical leadership and the conditions for organizational sustainability. He emphasizes that cooperation also needs some "*intergroup competition*" [5, p. 235] to appeal to the self-interest of employees, but not to cultivate egoism. In his view on the one hand managers are able to model a "collective commitment, emphasizing the similarity of group members" [5, p. 235] and they reinforce the collective goals and the shared values [5, p. 234]. On the other hand, they "create competition among teams, not individuals" [5, p. 234] like in a sports team. "But pitting individuals against each other in a competition for scarce resources (such as bonuses) will destroy hivishness, trust, and morale" [5, p. 235]. In other words, in a healthy organization *procedural fairness* is practised and *cooperation must be worthwhile*. Managers make sound decisions and they do not praise cooperation and then reward the free riders in the teams [ref. 24, pp. 30f].

But what does this mean for the customers' satisfaction and support for sustainable organizational success – from the perspective of public administration for the citizens in a country feeling respected by the representatives of their state? First of all, if employees can trust their managers and colleagues, they also can fully concentrate on their customers' requests and wishes and also on the task of working in accordance with law and administrative routines. And if working for example with the *balanced scorecard* as a strategy performance management tool – as nowadays not only commercial enterprises but most public administrations do, too – managers should choose the objectives according to the idea of procedural fairness with a positive sense for ethical leadership and long-term orientation [ref. 15, p. 164]. For example, managers could focus on an open team-oriented communication for healthy intraorganizational processes among their employees on the one hand, on the other hand they could concentrate on their customers' perspective [ref.16, p. 1228f]. Engrossing this idea, intra-organizational procedural fairness supported by a *situational leadership style* can first of all enhance employees' commitment to the organisation and thus also support procedural fairness towards the citizens whenever they are in need for administrative services [ref. 18].

4. The challenges of COVID-19 crisis and digitization

As described in the previous parts, a lack of empathy and procedural fairness might lead to intra-organisational egoism and silo mentality. Cooperation and error reduction are neglected. During a time in which digitization is essential to save lives and thus is being pushed on as never before in all spheres of society, a closer look should be made on the consequences for the *human factor* in work processes within public administration and with regard to the citizens: Generally speaking, already before the COVID-19 crisis, digitization has reached a degree in our society as a whole, in politics,

² In the context of public administration, this is also the case, of course, but always under the condition of the rule of law and procedural fairness which are mirrored in the administrative routines.

economy, media – and in public administration – which promises a well-being and an optimisation of everyone [ref. 11, p. 20]. One dimension of this promise is the fact that people gradually become more and more independent from other individuals and they do not need to cooperate and to help each other in everyday live as they had to in the past [ref. 11, p. 20]. It is obvious that public administration has to regard this dehumanization as one of its most important challenges apart from other digitization-related topics like cyber security, digital services and data policy [ref. 13, p. 9]. But what does all this mean for the function of public administration during the pandemic and afterwards?

First of all, it should be mentioned, that especially when working with big data and artificial intelligence on a higher degree than usual, moral and judicial decision-making should still be in the hands of human beings [ref. 2, p. 39f]. Also, generally speaking, the higher the activity of people in the internet, the higher the risk of privacy violation and discrimination of minorities [ref. 2, p. 40f]. Of course, during the pandemic, digitization is crucial to keep up a stable executive, welfare and health care system: “health offices, retracing the chains of infection, and civil service still being accessible for the citizens in need for support despite the lockdown” is needed and only possible digitally [9, p. 7]. But with an empirical view of a survey study on the use of e-government in Switzerland, Austria and Germany in summer 2020, digital civil service then was not used more often in general, because most people were already used to e-government services before with growing openness for them during the crisis [ref. 9, p. 19]. Seven of ten of the respondents emphasized the positive opportunities e-government offered during the COVID-19-crisis [9, p. 35]. When the data was collected, the corona-tracing apps and digital school teaching were just newly introduced. The latter had a difficult start because of a lack of IT-infrastructure in schools and digital competence of teachers, but also because some households – luckily a minority – could not afford enough technical devices for their children [ref. 9, p. 10]. And altogether it was criticized that shared (and cooperative learning) in dynamic groups was not provided [ref. 9, p. 53]. In Germany, the corona-tracing apps on the other hand were firstly criticized for possible privacy-deficiencies [ref. 9, p. 10], but after some time, in October 2020, about 20 million people had already downloaded the application [ref. 19, 2020].

In Germany, the enhanced digitization is in accordance with the “Onlinezugangsgesetz” (OZG) of the year 2017, that obliges all administrative levels to offer extensive digital services for their citizens [ref. 3, p. 10]. This law makes administrations responsible for working with easily understandable digital communication standards on three levels: intra-organisationally, among different administrations and with the citizens. Generally speaking, one problem for bureaucratic communication is its legalistic administrative language, very often annoying people being in need for administrative services [ref. 3, p. 10]. For the process of digitization, Rudolf Fisch recommends firstly to work with already existing documents, to check whether they really are according to the legalistic standards and then to reformulate the texts in the language of everyday life. Only after this has been done, digitization into suitable text modules for the use in the internet can be started [ref. 3, p. 11f]. The understanding of the message of a text consists of the elements reading, realizing, remembering, understanding, interpreting, analysing and evaluating [3, p. 15]. In contrast to that spoken language needs different elements of understanding: nonverbal communication like the facial expression and gestures, supporting the spoken words, must be interpreted; also, the intonation is important [3, p. 15]. Nonverbal communication intuitively gives listeners much more information than the mere content of spoken words, like a positive or negative connotation [ref. 3, p. 15]. An administrative act, having been digitalized, challenges the receiver in three ways: First the direct contact to the sender is missing, so all the above-mentioned aspects of human communication, empathy and cooperation based on shared experiences, eye contact and mutual

closeness cannot be taken into consideration. Secondly most information is given in the form of text elements, having to be formulated in an understandable way. And finally, all digital information the receiver is confronted with, is based on algorithmized legal language [ref. 20, p. 164]. In this context, algorithms are program codes, being used to formalize and solve specific problems with arithmetic statements [ref. 20, p. 164]. Not all services public administrations need to offer simply based on easily programmable if-then-constructions or on the much more complicated *deep learning* for the work with alternatives [ref. 20, p. 166]. Instead, moral intuition, empathy and creativity are also necessary to be innovative and to find adequate, humane solutions for the citizens. E-government might make bureaucracies much more bureaucratic than wanted. So, to conclude, those who make the decisions still have to be the public servants and not the algorithms, even during COVID-19-crisis.

Another dimension of the challenges for public administration are the working conditions during the pandemic: With regard to the effects of increased digitization on employees in 2020, home office-work was discussed. While most people were content with the working conditions, some groups suffered from the negative psychological effects of social distancing [4, p. 9]. This corresponds to a general research on the effects of home office-work on employees: In a survey from 2019, on the one hand 67,3 percent of the respondents believe, that they are more productive if working at home, 73,7 percent also answer, that they can work with more concentration and in addition, 45,8 percent are content with the amount of their workload [26]. But on the other hand, at the same time 73,4 percent of the respondents, working in home office, had very often felt exhausted during the last four weeks, compared with employees exclusively working in an office (66 percent). What is striking is the fact that 69,8 percent of the home office-workers complain about negative emotions like anger and despair in comparison with the 58,6 percent of the office-workers. In addition, of those working from at home, 67,5 percent suffer from nervousness and irritability compared with 52,7 percent of the office-workers [26].

One reason for these problems might be a lack of the balance between private and working life. However, what is self-evident for wording a hypothesis, is the fact that the above-mentioned "*human side of enterprise*" [14] is missing. All its aspects of the need for direct meetings, spontaneous communication and shared experiences are missing. These problems go with the "*zoom-fatigue*"-syndrome³ that was first discussed in the media in 2020 – when digital meetings had been in use to a much higher degree as ever before because of the pandemic [ref. 10]. Online meetings are experienced as very tiresome, because messages are left out: "While in the past, people had many meetings in their calendars, now there is only call after call. No breaks are necessary because people do not need to change the room. Two clicks, and the screen is filled with other people, arranged like ancient busts: Head and the upper part of the body is visible, nothing else. In the background: bookshelves, closets and kitchen interior. Everyone observes everybody, but nobody really looks into the eyes of somebody else. In order to give another person a feeling of being looked at in the virtual room, everyone would have to directly look into the camera – and not at the screen. But as all the other people would only be visible from the corner of the eyes, this would cause such a strange feeling, that nobody really tries to do that" [10]. Another problem is that the users always see themselves on the screen, a really unnatural situation [ref. 10], making oneself much too self-referential. Employees in general – in this special context – the civil servants – undergo a lack of mutual responsiveness and people are simply worn out by the digitized conditions at work and in every-day life, because there is too much of it.

³ The syndrome has been named after one of the providers of the software for online meetings, but of course, also stands for other software products.

5. Recommendations for a fair working culture and a professional service

After one year of social distancing during the pandemic in Europe, but also in the globalised world society, many already existing – but in the past still hidden problems – become apparent. Hollstein and Rosa even interpret some of the outcome of the pandemic as a chance for a fundamental paradigm shift in society, not being often observed in history [ref. 6, p. 27]. So, to conclude for our context, this time of accelerated digitization and general challenges for society at least give us the chance to map recommendations for the functioning of public administration in the future; some will follow now:

Despite accelerated digitization, for a fair working culture, a professional service and sustainable organisational success, *mutual trust and understanding* must be supported, even in a higher degree than before 2020. Employees need a common goal to work with a *shared intentionality*, of which they are aware of and they need to have the chance to *cooperate but also to compete* [ref. 5, p. 235]. So *oral communication* in the classical form of a normal meeting, a conference or a phone call should be kept alive even during the pandemic whenever possible, because – from an evolutionary point of view – civil servants and citizens simply cannot communicate only on the basis of written communication or online-meetings [ref. 3, p. 15].

Also, future plans for further technological developments *should not include dehumanized information technologies like chatbots and virtual assistants*, based on artificial intelligence. They could harm intra-organisational processes but also the communication with the institutions' customers. Maybe someday the deep learning technology might have become so advanced that it could perfectly copy human thinking, but who wants to give moral and judicial decision-making out of the control of human individuals into the hands of machines [ref. 2, p. 39f]?

In addition, to some degree, online-meetings and technologies for *augmented und virtual reality* could help to support dynamic group work⁴, but this is also dependent on the technical facilities of public administration and their users [9, p. 53]. Also, digitization's success depends on whether users had the chance to *gain digital competence and to keep themselves healthy*, which is highly based on self-discipline and the ability to keep a private distance to work even when working from at home [ref. 26].

With regard to *organization development* in public administration a human value-based ethical leadership-strategy based on the model of change of Kurt Lewin could be helpful [ref. 8, pp. 237-238 and ref. 12], if change management with regard to digitization is regarded to be necessary. The model consists of the three stages “unfreezing”, “changing” and “refreezing”. The *unfreezing*, now taking place everywhere during the last years and in times of the pandemic at an accelerated tempo, could be described the following way: for every organization the question should be asked how much further digitization is necessary, what would be possible advantages and disadvantages of further digitization, what kind of vision could be connected with it, and who could act as an expert for the process. From then on, a professional organization development process should be pushed on when the *changing* stage is being started: precise management objectives about digitization should be formulated, new structures and processes should be developed and also resources and conditions should be defined. Many organizations now have just already reached this stage because of the urgency of the situation. But this then must be conducted professionally and followed by the *refreezing* stage: the new IT processes and coordinated practices should be trained, new standards

⁴ This also goes for home schooling, for example.

should be developed and should be integrated into everyday work. But most of all, there should prevail an openness for further change and new development cycles, also with an alternative perspective of a reduction of the proportion of digitized work when necessary. Digitization must not be an end in itself and be a burden for organizations, especially when the pandemic is over.

For the future, public administration and its employees and managers *should keep in balance the necessities of a digitized democratic society (then hopefully without the urgency of a pandemic) and of a fair working culture and professional service for their customers.* In addition, the influences of digitization on empathy among the members of public administration and the citizens and the effects on cooperation and organisational sustainability, could be a constant research topic in order to adequately react to further developments after the crisis year 2020.

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