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Managers and political astuteness: Lessons for the Victorian Public Service

Jean Hartley, Open University

John Alford, ANZSOG and the Melbourne Business School

Owen Hughes, RMIT

Sophie Yates, ANZSOG



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Contact us at:

ANZSOG
email: anzsog@anzsog.edu.au
phone: +61 3 8344 1990
fax: +61 3 9349 5849

Postal Address:

PO Box 230
Carlton South
Victoria 3052
Australia

Web address:

www.anzsog.edu.au

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Contact us at:

Victorian Public Sector Commission
Email: info@vpsc.vic.gov.au
Phone: +61 3 9651 1321
Fax: +61 3 9651 0747

Postal Address:

3 Treasury Place
Melbourne
Victoria 3002
Australia

Web address:

www.vpsc.vic.gov.au

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About the authors

Jean Hartley is Professor of Public Leadership in the Department of Public Leadership and Social Enterprise at the UK's Open University Business School. Professor Hartley has contributed to the field of public leadership and management for two decades through research, teaching and development work. She has written six books and numerous articles on public leadership and management.

Her core discipline is organisational psychology but most of her research is cross-disciplinary with a focus on public leadership and management. Her special interests are in leadership with political astuteness, leadership development and its evaluation, and innovation and organisational change in public services.

John Alford is Professor of Public Sector Management at ANZSOG, on extended secondment from the Melbourne Business School. As well as leading the subject 'Delivering Public Value' in ANZSOG's Executive MPA, Professor Alford teaches a number of executive programs for the School. He has also lectured at universities in the Netherlands, Germany, the United Kingdom, Thailand, and the United States.

Among his publications are articles in leading international journals and numerous book chapters. His most recent book is *Rethinking Public Service Delivery: Managing with External Providers* (2012 – co-authored with Janine O'Flynn).

Owen Hughes is Dean of Students at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. Professor Hughes has published widely in management, public management, public policy and Australian politics. His book *Public Management and Administration* is in its fourth edition (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) and has been used widely as a textbook in the UK and Australia, as well as in the US, Africa, the Middle East and Asia.

Sophie Yates is a Research Fellow at ANZSOG, where she is Assistant Editor of *Evidence Base* journal and coordinator of the competitive grants program. She also writes for ANZSOG's case program. Ms Yates has a B.A./B.Mus and a Master of Applied Linguistics from the University of Melbourne.

Managers and political astuteness: Lessons for the Victorian Public Service

Jean Hartley, John Alford, Owen Hughes and Sophie Yates¹

Public managers work in an inherently political environment. They must work with external institutions and stakeholders – government and civil society organisations; lobbyists and pressure groups as well as with internal factions or groupings. The growing role of outside bodies in influencing policy and co-producing services – and the requirement for managers to interact with such bodies – increases the need for managers to exercise the skills of political astuteness.

Meanwhile, globalisation and uncertainties about world governance, national stability or local priorities may have unexpected repercussions. A 24-hour news cycle and ever-present social media demand rapid responses by governments and a keen appreciation by managers of how policy and practice are perceived by media and public audiences. Most public managers will be familiar with the ‘wicked problem’ – one where there is little agreement about what the problem is, who is responsible for it and especially how it might be tackled.

As these problems become increasingly prevalent for governments and public services, managers must become more attuned to the political challenges and tensions that go with them. How they navigate this landscape is the focus of this paper.

This stream of research began with a study conducted across the public, private and voluntary sectors in the UK, with a focus on political awareness.² The public sector element of that research was the starting point for further research conducted by ANZSOG researchers in 2010-11, with the focus shifted to a more active characterisation of political skills – from political awareness to political astuteness. Some results from this three-country research are presented here, and a full report is available on the ANZSOG website.³ The report also contains a review of the literature, both about politics and about management, but also politics for public managers specifically.

Following our literature review, we define political astuteness as ‘...deploying political skills in situations involving diverse and sometimes competing interests and stakeholders, in order to achieve sufficient alignment of interests and/or consent in order to achieve outcomes’.⁴ Our definition is carefully neutral about outcomes, as we believe that political astuteness can be used not only for positive social and organisational purposes but also for negative ends such as self-interest or internal turf wars.

Research questions and methods

Research questions

- What is the nature of political astuteness in public management? How important is it to public managers’ work?
- How politically astute are public managers?

¹ This paper is based, with permission, on a White Paper by the same authors published by the UK Chartered Management Institute: http://www.managers.org.uk/sites/default/files/u42492/Leading_with_political_astuteness_white_paper_2013.pdf.

² Hartley J., Fletcher, C., Wilton, P., Woodman, P. and Ungemach, C. (2007) *Leading with political awareness*. London: Chartered Management Institute.

³ *Leading with political astuteness: A study of public managers in Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom*. See http://www.anzsog.edu.au/magma/media/upload/publication/124_LWPA-report-Hartley-Alford-Hughes-Yates.pdf.

⁴ ibid.

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- Does political astuteness vary by context, type of organisation and managerial level?
 - In what contexts do public managers use political astuteness?
 - How do public managers develop political skills?

Data collection methods

- Survey – 1,012 managers participated online. They were mostly senior or very senior, and came from all four UK countries, eight of Australia's nine governments (at federal, state and territory levels, including 45 Victorians) and New Zealand's unitary government.
- Interviews – 42 semi-structured interviews were conducted (some of these were carried out in the UK as part of a related study which has been published separately).⁵ Interviewees came from local, national and devolved governments in the UK, state (including four Victorians) and federal levels in Australia, and the national government in New Zealand.

This paper mainly analyses the results from the three countries in aggregate, with a few choice differences highlighted for interest.

Findings

Politics in bureaucracy: more altruistic than Machiavellian

'Politics' has sometimes been a dirty word, both within organisations and in the context of democratic governance. But our research reflected a more positive view. Our participants felt that, by understanding politics, they could learn what is required of them and act on it to achieve publicly valuable outcomes – politics is a means of getting things done.

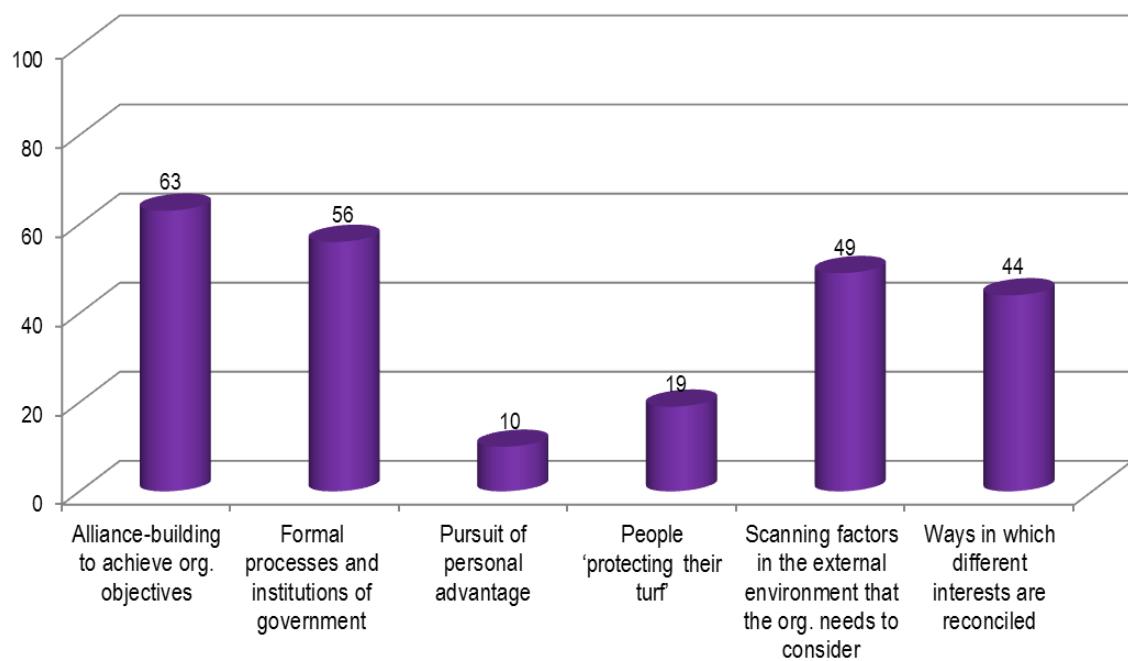
Much has been written on the politics/administration dichotomy, and our interview participants were keenly alive to the dangers of usurping (or being seen to usurp) the decision-making rights afforded to politicians through the democratic process. However, they felt strongly that it was not possible to operate effectively as a senior manager without well-developed political skills.

The findings indicate that, overall:

- Participants in our three countries saw the potential of politics for working in the public interest.
- A good grasp of politics enables them to assess internal and external factors, and reconcile different interests.
- Political skills can help them build alliances to achieve organisational objectives, rather than ones dominated by self-interest.
- Participants tended to give more weight to expansive and outward-looking views of politics than internal politics.

⁵ Manzie, S. and Hartley, J. (2013). *Dancing on Ice: leadership with political astuteness by senior public servants in the UK*. Milton Keynes: The Open University Business School.

Figure 1. Overall responses to “Which of the following comes closest to your understanding of politics in your work as a manager?”⁶



There were some variations of emphasis among the three countries, as the table below reveals. The self-interest/turf protection view of politics (termed by us the ‘dark side’) was much stronger among British managers than their Antipodean counterparts. For instance, 17 per cent of UK managers thought politics was ‘pursuit of personal advantage’ compared with four per cent of Australian managers and only one per cent of New Zealand managers. Conversely, UK public managers put somewhat less emphasis on alliance building, scanning the environment and reconciling differences.

Table 1: “Which of the following comes closest to your understanding of politics in your work as a manager?” (expressed as %)

Understanding of politics	AU	NZ	UK	Overall	Sig diff at .05 level (chi square)
Alliance-building to achieve organisational objectives	67	71	58	63	AU and UK NZ and UK
Formal processes and institutions of government	58	62	53	56	None
Pursuit of personal advantage	4	1	17	10	AU and UK NZ and UK
People ‘protecting their turf’	13	7	27	19	AU and UK NZ and UK
Scanning factors in the external environment that the organisation needs to consider	59	64	37	49	AU and UK NZ and UK
Ways in which different interests are reconciled	52	45	36	44	AU and UK

⁶ Participants were asked to select up to three options.

Overall, a clear picture emerged of public managers having a much more positive view of politics in organisations than is often portrayed in management literature.

However, the survey results varied according to managerial level. Senior managers were more likely to have a positive or neutral view of politics than to see it in terms of personal advantage or 'protecting turf'. Conversely, middle managers were more likely to see it in negative or neutral terms.

The quantitative findings were reinforced and elaborated by depth interviews. Our interviewees returned an overwhelming response: politics is ubiquitous, and astuteness essential. Some examples include:

P06: I think it really has to be part of what you do every day.

P07: You can't afford to push it away.

P08: Look I gotta say, in senior executive positions in government, what I'm struggling to do is think of a situation where I haven't found political skills to be useful, rather than examples of where I have.

A systematic analysis of responses to the open-ended question "what does political astuteness mean to you?" again revealed the importance of the formal political world, and the crucial skill of understanding the wider context. We put this question to 28 interview participants, and identified 36 codifiable elements in their responses. Of those, by far the most frequent were what we have termed 'understanding politicians' worlds' (9) – which was often cited as a way of helping managers be of most use to their political masters – and 'understanding of/interest in the wider context' (8). Other responses related to getting things done, knowing where 'the line' is between politics and bureaucracy, and understanding/influencing stakeholders. Only one participant volunteered a definition tending to the 'dark side'. The full list of political astuteness definition themes, including examples, is at Appendix 1.

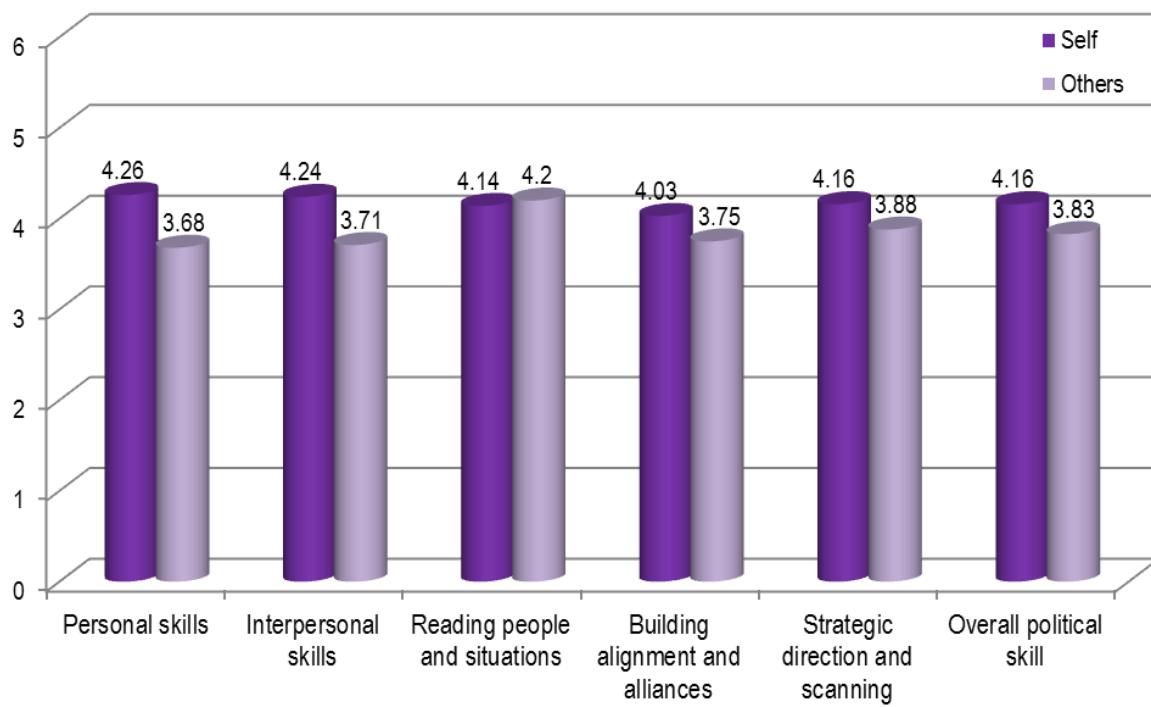
Managers see room for improvement in their political skills

Considering the relative seniority of most of our participants, their ratings of political skill were surprisingly low. When rating their own and their peers' political astuteness (using the 50 items in our five-dimension skills framework), public managers in all three countries were fairly moderate in their judgements – both of themselves and others.

However, there were small but significant differences between the 'self' and 'others' ratings. Respondents generally rated their own political skills more highly than those of fellow managers (overall, 4.16 compared to 3.84 on a six-point scale, as shown in Figure 2). This 'leniency bias' or 'illusory superiority', which is of course logically impossible if the sample is valid, frequently occurs when survey respondents are asked to rate themselves and others.

Generally, they viewed their own and their colleagues' political skills as no better than average to good, especially the 'macro' skills. They were a little more positive about 'micro' skills, but, interestingly, reported that colleagues were as good as themselves, or even better, at 'reading people and situations' (which lies between micro and macro levels).

**Figure 2: Mean assessment of self and others across five domains of political skills
(on scale of 1-6)**



We explored the quantitative data further by analysing demographic and other variables: management level or seniority; managers' conceptions of politics; gender; and organisational growth.

We conducted chi square tests, t-tests for independent means, and ANOVAs. Findings included:

- The more senior the managers, the higher they rated their own skills.
- Participants who subscribed to positive definitions of politics (e.g. 'ways in which different interests are reconciled') were more likely to rate their political skills as high than those who had negative definitions (e.g. 'people 'protecting their turf').
- Gender made no difference to participants' ratings of their political skills.
- Participants were asked whether their organisations were declining, stable, or growing. Those whose organisations were declining were more likely to rate their *colleagues'* (rather than their own) skills as lower than those in stable or growing organisations. The evaluation of colleagues was higher for those whose organisations were stable, and higher still for growing organisations.
- The UK mean scores (both self-rating and rating of others) showed that public managers took a dimmer view of the effectiveness of their own and their peers' political skills than did their counterparts in Australia and New Zealand.

Political skills have a big impact on external relationships

Formal politics was considered the arena where political skills were most valuable, as indicated by our interview findings above, but this was closely followed by their application to the less formal. Table 2 shows respondents' ratings of various applications for political astuteness, ordered from most to least

valuable. Some questions were only asked of the Aus/NZ sample, and those are indicated with an asterisk.⁷

Table 2: Responses to “please rate the extent to which you find it valuable to use political skills in the following situations”

Situation	Mean (0-4)
Dealing with Ministers*	3.42
Dealing with central agencies such as Treasury or the PM's/Premier's Department*	3.14
Thinking about how public opinion has an impact on your organisation	3.1
Working with influential people in your organisation	3.07
Dealing with other politicians*	2.96
Working with partners and strategic alliances	2.94
Dealing with interest groups*	2.9
Working with the media	2.86
Scanning changes in society for their impact on your organisation	2.84
Dealing with different levels of government*	2.77
Working with cliques and power blocs in your organisation	2.48
Scanning changes internationally for their impact on your organisation	2.21
Working with global governance organisations	1.83

The perceived importance of organisational politics was more mixed. On the one hand, ‘working with influential people in your organisation’ was relatively highly rated, while ‘working with cliques and power blocs in your organisation’ was much less important overall, perhaps reflecting the more negative connotations of the latter.

Turning to the qualitative data, we asked our interviewees about situations in which they found it most useful to employ their political astuteness skills. It was clear that these managers were, in the main, externally focused. They particularly valued their political skills when working with and influencing entities external to their organisations, including advocacy groups, other government organisations, politicians, different levels of government, and the private sector. Several managers were adamant that their political astuteness was useful every day, in all contexts. Only two mentioned specifically intra-organisational concerns.

All these findings related to ways of getting things done, with persuasion seen as vital for achieving outcomes.

The politics/administration dichotomy is more a zone than a line

The politics/administration dichotomy has been a perennial issue within public administration and management at least since Woodrow Wilson's classic formulation in the late 19th century. In its strongest form, it draws a clearly defined line separating political activity from the work of administrators: the role of elected politicians is to decide policy, and that of administrators is to carry it out, with neither venturing into the territory of the other. But as we have previously discussed, our

⁷ This is because the survey was first given to a large sample of private, public and third sector managers in the UK. The survey was then modified for its public-sector only Aus/NZ sample, to take account more specifically of the public sector context.

participants felt they were required to be political (though not party political) in order to effectively carry out their roles. Thus a key issue for managers is how far they can deploy their astuteness – they need to know where the ‘line’ is between politics and administration.

Twelve of our interviewees commented on whether they saw a clear line or an overlapping zone between their work and the domain of their political masters. Five responded that they experienced a relatively clear distinction between the two domains, two that there was some small overlap, and seven that there was no clear line. Thus, over half these managers experienced at least some overlap between politics and bureaucracy, while even those who thought the distinction was relatively clear were adamant that an acute political understanding was necessary to effectively serve their political masters:

P03: ...back in the department we're in the land of Westminster, in best advice, frank and fearless, but always with both ears open to how does the minister want to do this? Or what matters most to him?

Other observations volunteered by our interviewees included:

- A ‘no man’s land’ exists between politics and the public service.
- There is a shifting line, incorporating more politics or more administration at different times.
- There is a gap between rhetoric and reality.
- ‘Breaches’ are caused both by public servants straying too far into politics or politicians having too tight a grip on the public service.
- ‘Frank and fearless has taken a few body blows’ in recent times.

This all means that public managers must make delicate judgements about when to deliver what a minister or political leader wants – even if it is not the best option – and when to push for something better. Some interviewees also reported that sometimes politicians did not know exactly what they wanted, and it was therefore incumbent on the public managers in those situations to work to crystallise policies, preferably with involvement by the elected politicians.

Political skills are developed through trial and error

Leadership development courses abound for today’s senior public sector managers. However, our participants had overwhelmingly acquired their political skills ‘on the job’: through experience gained; good or bad role models; and learning from mistakes – and generally on their own. Structured approaches, such as psychometric testing, leadership books, formal mentoring or coaching, had been considered less valuable, and less widely used anyway. For our survey participants, academic study also ranked lower than most ‘on-the-job’ options.

One possible explanation for this is that a degree of illegitimacy still attaches to the notion of managers exercising political astuteness (despite the evidence presented here). Consequently, it is something in which organisations may be reluctant to invest.

Our study reveals that most respondents learned their political astuteness skills through what are called ‘emergent’ rather than ‘planned’ development activities. However, experience on its own is generally seen to be insufficient for leadership development. The aphorism that some people have twenty years’ experience while others have a year’s experience repeated 20 times reminds us that learning from experience is not automatic. One interview participant summed up the ad hoc method of development neatly as follows:

P08: I think sadly most of mine's been through trial and error. I'd like to pretend that there was something else involved in it. ...I guess if you bang your head against a brick wall for long enough you might start thinking to yourself "hey every time I swing my head forward like this it hurts and this is the hundredth time I've done it so maybe I should stop". It's rarer, to stretch the metaphor perhaps, to see someone in the public service bang their head against a brick wall once and then go "hmm, that hurt, let's have a little think about why that happened just then", and never hits their head against a brick wall again.

There is also the danger that inappropriate conclusions can be drawn from experience, resulting in less than effective performance.

There is a general consensus from researchers that many of the skills, mindsets and behaviours of leadership can be learned – acquired rather than innate. This suggests some future paths for leadership research and for leadership development policy and practice.

Implications for public leadership and management

This study is about 'leading with political astuteness', not just being politically astute per se. Our findings provide insights into leadership beyond the political realm.

Managers who acquire political skills also, in the process, develop leadership skills. For example, interpersonal skills include the capacity to influence the thinking and behaviour of others, to secure cooperation from people over whom the manager has no line authority, and to make people feel valued. They also include 'tougher' skills such as the ability to negotiate, to stand up to pressures from others, and achieve constructive outcomes from conflict. These are all important in generic leadership and management. Similarly, the ability to understand the larger environment and diagnose what is really happening below the surface or over the horizon is a key capability for strategic leadership, as emphasised by our interview participants.

The political astuteness framework helps bring new insights to understanding the tasks of leadership. Traditional theory still focuses too much on the view that building consensus and commitment, and 'selling' a vision to 'followers' counts as effectiveness. Increasingly, commentators are questioning this 'small group' view when applied to larger organisations, or to society, where multiple interests exist. This research supports the value of thinking about leadership as needing to recognise diverse or pluralistic interests – something that requires a political understanding.

Arguably all managers – public or private – will be more effective if they are more aware of the stakeholders and varied interests around them. This goes beyond thinking of them just as competitors or collaborators, and takes into account a broader politics. By contrast with the widely-held assumption that government should learn effectiveness and efficiency from the private sector, it implies that the public sector might provide lessons for private business about coping with the complex forces – political, environmental and social – that have hit the corporate world in recent decades.

Why does politics matter to public managers?

Clearly, key aspects of public managers' jobs have a political dimension better dealt with if political astuteness is applied. The great majority of respondents – mostly senior and very senior managers – saw the presence of politics as a given. Some talked about a particular point in the career ladder where they felt they had to start understanding the politics, a world from which they had been protected when lower down the pecking order.

It is evident that politics matters most to public managers when it allows them to get things done, or to most ably assist others in getting things done. In Westminster systems, decisions by ministers and other elected politicians are powerful indications of what managers can and cannot do. However, when clearly authorised, public managers have to work with others to enable policies to be developed, understood and supported. This authority strengthens the manager's hand in dealing with other stakeholders who may have competing agendas.

How far should public managers get involved in politics?

In classical public administration theory, public sector managers should concentrate on implementing policy decisions, but stay out of making those decisions, which is the preserve of elected politicians. However, we found that public managers often stray into political behaviour, for example helping politicians to clarify or develop workable policies, or ensuring wide consultation among key stakeholders. Senior public servants do more than simply carry out decisions handed down from ministers' offices.

If that is all they did, they would struggle to fulfil their duties. Yet, while they routinely cross the 'line' (or enter the 'purple zone'),⁸ most public managers firmly believe that big decisions should be made by elected politicians rather than appointed officials. Astute public servants recognise where the zone is and how far they can stray into it without compromising their ethical code or committing career suicide. This entails judging the trade-off between what, in policy terms, is at stake and the risk of acting or being seen to act illegitimately. The paradox is that possessing political astuteness appears to enable managers to better judge where the line or zone is.

Conclusions and recommendations

This paper has explored how public managers might better cope by becoming more politically astute. Political skill can enhance public managers' ability to:

- conceive of purposes or policies that reduce conflict while offering valuable outcomes;
- persuade other stakeholders of their merits; and
- be aware of how far they can stray into the domain of their elected political masters without abusing the democratic process.

However, it can also lead to gaming both by politicians and public servants, from withholding information to buck-passing. Giving bureaucrats too much licence to engage in politics might allow them to suborn democratic processes for undemocratic or venal ends. But democracy can draw comfort from our finding that politically astute managers are likely to hold a positive view of politics, seeing it as a way to get organisational and social goals achieved through managing diverse interests. Moreover, when required to enter a political world they are inclined to act in the public interest rather than selfishly – precisely because they are astute.

Recommendations

The process of acquiring political astuteness needs to be improved. Too often, the acquisition of such skills is haphazard and based on mistakes. The opportunity to reflect on experience – perhaps talking to a boss, colleague, or mentor – is particularly valuable. But there is too little formal development of these important skills.

⁸ Hughes, O., Alford, J. and Hartley, J. (2013) 'Into the purple zone: Interactions between senior civil servants and political leaders'. International Research Symposium on Public Management, Prague, April 2013.

The evidence we provide here forms a strong basis for practical action. These recommendations are set out for individual managers, for organisations, and for providers of education and training including professional bodies.

At the individual manager level

- 1) Maximise your learning from mistakes and crises – and from the example of other managers – by honing your skills of observation, reflection and questioning. Mistakes, if well handled, may teach valuable lessons.
- 2) Check if your political astuteness skills are as good as you think they are. Encourage feedback from all sides.
- 3) Seek the chance to observe, or play a part, in situations demanding political sensitivity; and then think analytically about how well you read people and situations.
- 4) Improve your strategic scanning skills – keep abreast with current thinking in newspapers and other media, and in professional journals and magazines. Draw useful information and lessons from outside your usual network of contacts.

At the organisational level

- 1) Analyse the key contexts in which the organisation operates and check to see if you are equipped with all the necessary political skills. Make sure your organisation is aware of and as far as possible prepared for any new landscapes that emerge. Key managers should be exposed to these and all learning shared.
- 2) Consider developing political astuteness skills more systematically. This could involve managers at all levels, from team leaders up to senior executives. It might involve embedding a policy of moving managers around the organisation, exposing them to different cultures and practices and encouraging secondments to other organisations.
- 3) Develop a climate that tries to learn from mistakes and crises – a common means of gaining and honing political skills. Our findings suggest that confidential discussion groups and action learning sets – formal or informal – could help foster political astuteness.
- 4) Start considering political astuteness skills across whole teams and use diagnostic methods of assessing those. Assessment tools such as the Political Astuteness Skills tool, developed as part of this research series, can provide powerful insights – see www.managers.org.uk/astuteness.
- 5) Create a system to mentor and coach less politically astute and less experienced managers.

At the central agency level

- 1) Examine strategies for leadership development, and ensure political astuteness skills are included. Many public sector capability frameworks in Australia and New Zealand already do address elements of political astuteness, especially at senior levels – though fewer in the UK.
- 2) Become more explicit about the need to develop the political dimension.
- 3) Use a political skills framework to help managers develop a language and understanding of the behaviour and qualities that enhance political astuteness.
- 4) Shape management courses so that they include learning about the political context of organisational performance. Educational organisations could include more content directed towards developing these skills. While formal approaches are currently seen as less effective than the informal, we argue – on the basis of the research evidence about leadership development – that a combination of the two can be more powerful. An academic focus on drawing lessons from day-to-day experience may help make sense of things through theoretically informed reflection. Study, or taking a qualification to gain exposure to new ideas

and challenge one's own mindset, may bring benefits. Case studies and role-plays could derive insight that has long term value from everyday experience.

Further reading

Hartley, J., Alford, J., Hughes, O. and Yates, S. (2013) *Leading with political astuteness: A study of public managers in Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom*. Melbourne: ANZSOG and the Chartered Management Institute. Available at <http://www.anzsog.edu.au/magma/media/upload/publication/124_LWPA-report-Hartley-Alford-Hughes-Yates.pdf>.

Hartley J., Fletcher, C., Wilton, P., Woodman, P. and Ungemach, C. (2007) *Leading with political awareness*. London: Chartered Management Institute. Available at <<http://www.managers.org.uk/politicalawareness>>.

Manzie, S. and Hartley, J. (2013) *Dancing on Ice: leadership with political astuteness by senior public servants in the UK*. Milton Keynes: The Open University Business School. Available at <http://oro.open.ac.uk/38472/1/_userdata_documents2_bar2/Desktop_Doi%20report%20FINAL.pdf>.

Appendix 1: Qualitative responses to the question “what does political astuteness mean to you?”

Definition	Freq.	Example
Understanding politicians' worlds	9	<i>P19: Political astuteness is understanding their life, what drives them, what worries them, look out for them, protect them like they're a client.</i>
Understanding of/interest in the wider context	8	<i>P16: ...knowing the political cycle, really understanding your environment, understanding the issues, understanding what's happening all over the world and what responses have been elsewhere, knowing you don't operate in a vacuum.</i>
Getting things done	3	<i>P03: ...our judgement as professional senior executives, in terms of what's it going to take to get agreement to do things. It's also about licence to operate, so how hard can you push on different issues and in different places and spaces, and advising the minister of our views as to what you can feasibly seek to negotiate and what is not going to work</i>
Knowing where the line is, (inc. signalling neutrality to politicians)	3	<i>P24: Political astuteness is [also about] knowing when the time has come when you just have to deliver what ministers want delivered. You can put all the arguments up you like, you can talk to colleagues and find other ways, but at the end of the day officials advise, ministers decide.</i>
Understanding and/or influencing stakeholders	3	<i>P02: For my work, political astuteness I think is about having a gauge of the readiness of the different stakeholders that I deal with, because my agenda is very much a change agenda.</i>
Anticipating consequences (inc. the doctrine of 'no surprises')	2	<i>P22: We'd probably call it political awareness or something: [that] if something happens, you're able to process what the political impact will be, then what the likely action from [the government] might be, in terms of how they need to deal with an issue.</i>
Intra-organisational understanding	2	<i>P06: It's about knowing an organisation, knowing the people in the organisation that can make things happen, and using those relationships and networks for that to occur.</i>
Understanding others' points of view and underlying agendas	2	<i>P23: ...trying not to take anything at face value, so always asking a question about what's motivating something, what's behind it, what's at play, what the incentives are for the way that people are behaving, what really matters here, is it the apparent issue or is it something behind it that's actually more significant?</i>
Analysing risks and opportunities	1	<i>P18: What we have to do is identify key risks and think about how to work round them, either how to prevent them or how to minimise them or how to deal with them if they do occur. And if you don't have political astuteness then it's likely that you will have a lower tolerance for ambiguity and be much more focused on rules.</i>
Crafting advice and outputs for maximum impact	1	<i>P16: My job is to make sure that all my research gets out there, so I have to couch it in a way that I'm pretty sure that it's going to get out there. And I suppose political astuteness is also picking those issues and knowing which ones aren't going to offend any of the governments but still get the important information out there.</i>
Playing politics	1	<i>P08: I sometimes think of people that are described as politically astute, [they are] well-connected to the political party in power at the time, so it's the person that can pick up the phone and ring an adviser and have a coffee and make something happen.</i>
Timing your actions to achieve desired outcomes	1	<i>P11: ...it's understanding that there are times when there isn't an opportunity and neither should you force it, because it's just apolitically astute to do so. And then there are times when you're oven-ready and you can see the opportunity and move in, and it's a good time to do or say something.</i>
Total	36	