

LEADerShip at a Glance

CHLNet's "Top Three" Suggested LEADS Readings for COVID-19

Introduction:

This month's *Top Three* focuses on the issue of public administration of health care in Canada as contained within the Canada Health Act¹, and the role of leadership in critically examining our delivery models in light of current social demands.

Canada relies primarily on large health service delivery organizations—i.e., provincially regionalized in one organization as in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Nova Scotia; or as six publicly administered regional health authorities in BC, five in Manitoba, two in New Brunswick, four in Newfoundland, one in PEI. In Quebec and Ontario health service delivery is less centralized but moving towards larger delivery models (i.e., Ontario Health Teams).

The public administration criterion of the Canada Health Act relates to the **administration of provincial/territorial health care insurance plans for medically necessary healthcare services**. The intent is to prevent private health insurance plans from competing with the publicly administered plans. The public administration requirement stipulates that provincial/territorial health care insurance plans must be administered by a public agency on a not-for-profit basis. Yet, it is equally important to understand clearly what the public administration principle of the Canada Health Act does *not* mean. This principle refers to the administration of health care *insurance coverage; it is agnostic as relates to the delivery of publicly insured health services*. Yet, from a delivery perspective, most of the models or organizational design have embraced the notions implicit to a bureaucracy: an administrative policy-making group characterized by specialization of functions, adherence to fixed rules, and a [hierarchy](#) of authority.

This Top 3 profiles three articles that explore the wisdom of the primary choice of health service delivery to be via bureaucracies. Some recent literature suggests that recent events in society: i.e., what has been termed a VUCA environment—volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous context for health service delivery—might occasion a critical look at our models of health system administration, and service delivery and their suitability for such an uncertain leadership environment. Health care leaders must work *within* an organizational context, but also *on* that organizational context if indeed it may not enhance the ability to deliver insured health services more efficiently and more equitably, in the spirit of people-centred care.

The three articles contribute to this discourse in the following ways.

Article 1 discusses bureaucracy with respect to the popular notion of distributed leadership and examines the relationship between the two. The author argues that bureaucracy, as a way of organizing health service delivery, is still robust as a “means of shaping and containing power in a way that is sophisticated”.

¹ See Section 8 of the Canada Health Act. Link here: <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/c-6/page-1.html>.

Article 2 looks at the impact of COVID 19 in terms of what the authors call, ‘turbulent problems’ arising in a VUCA environment. It specifically outlines the consequences of the new focus on robust governance for public administration and leadership.

Article 3 outlines alternative ways to organize health service delivery, in keeping with the notion of offering employee ‘emancipation’ and ‘autonomy’. It explores ideal organizational forms that suggest delivery models other than traditional bureaucratic organizational approaches. The author makes the claim that some of these approaches are “especially viable in industries where interdependence between units is low”; which may—or may not—reflect the ideal health delivery system of the future.

A review of these three articles is interesting because it enables us—as leaders—to explore different ways of organizing and delivering services to our populations. This review may assist in understanding some of the organizational design innovations that might maximize our ability to do so.

Article 1:

Lumby J. Distributed leadership and bureaucracy. [Educational Management Administration & Leadership](#). 2019 Jan;47(1):5-19.

Summary:

This article discusses organization design in the context of the education sector of public administration. It considers distributed leadership in the context of the extensive literature on post bureaucratic organisations.

The author suggests that both distributed leadership and bureaucracy are ideal types. He outlines the development of bureaucracy as an organisational form, challenges the often stereotypical criticisms that have damned the theory and questions the withdrawal of the field of educational leadership from constructive engagement. He also explores the notion that bureaucracy is conceived as a means of shaping and containing power in a way that is sophisticated and has developed considerably since Weber’s original idea.

The article also outlines the development of distributed leadership and critiques the assertion that it offers a means of redistributing power, arguing there is little evidence that this happens in any reliable way. His argument suggests that such reliance is often based on a limited zero-sum concept of power and a sanitised view of staff and organisations. His conclusion is that bureaucracy offers a more realistic and deeper engagement with issues of power, and that its rejection, except as a butt of criticism, deliberately ignores an enduring and important aspect of leading organisations. Finally, he postulates that educational leaders need to engage positively with bureaucracy if they are to transform education.

Article 2:

Ansell C, Sørensen E, Torfing J. The COVID-19 pandemic as a game changer for public administration and leadership? The need for robust governance responses to turbulent problems. [Public Management Review](#). 2021 Jul 3;23(7):949-60.

Summary:

The COVID-19 pandemic reveals that the public sector is not only facing simple and complex problem, but also turbulent problems characterized by the surprising emergence of inconsistent, unpredictable, and uncertain events. Turbulent problems call for robust governance solutions that are sufficiently adaptable, agile and pragmatic to uphold a particular goal or function in the face of continuous disruptions.

This article defines the concepts of turbulence and robustness and provides examples of robust governance strategies that are illustrated by the current COVID-19 response. Finally, it draws the consequences of the new focus on robust governance for public administration and leadership, which directly relate to our leadership practices within bureaucratic organizational models, as well as our leadership practices on those models, to adapt and adjust organizational design to respond to the challenges of a VUCA environment.

Article 3:

Martela F. What makes self-managing organizations novel? Comparing how Weberian bureaucracy, Mintzberg's adhocracy, and self-organizing solve six fundamental problems of organizing. [Journal of Organization Design](#). 2019 Dec;8(1):1-23.

Summary:

The bureaucratic organizational structure has been recently challenged by a number of organizations that claim to offer employee emancipation and autonomy through self-management, self-organizing, or "holacracy."

The author examines self-organizing organizations as an ideal type of organizational form, comparing it to two more established organizational forms, Weberian bureaucracy and Mintzberg's adhocracy.

More particularly, he builds on the four universal problems every organization needs to solve—two of which he divides into two sub-problems—utilize a framework of six fundamental problems of organizing—task division, task allocation, rewarding desired behavior, eliminating freeriding, providing direction, and ensuring coordination—to demonstrate how these three forms of organizing have found different solutions to them.

In the author's view, the radically decentralized model of authority at the heart of self-managing organizations is shown to lead to solutions to these problems that are based on peer-based accountability and rewarding, transparency of key information, and bottom-up emergent processes where employees have the authority and responsibility to identify necessary tasks and ensure that they get done. It is concluded that the self-managing organization indeed is a novel form of organizing that can better explain certain real-life organizational outliers than the existing paradigms of organizing. It is argued to be especially viable in industries where interdependence between units is low, outputs are highly tailored, and employee expertise and motivation are high.

Link to LEADS:

The LEADS link is specific to the two domains of [Lead Self](#) and [Systems Transformation](#). From a [Lead Self](#) perspective, they suggest we explore our mental models as it relates to public administration organizational models of service delivery, and potentially challenge our predisposition to accept current—bureaucratic—models as a given. From a [Systems Transformation](#) perspective, the three articles provide the opportunity to apply the 'demonstrates systems and critical thinking' capability to organizational designs we might need to employ as we move forward to the future of health care. Organizational designs that may well imbue many of the characteristics of bureaucracy, but also embrace some of the notions or self-organization so we can react more effectively in a turbulent environment and provide the people-centred care so desperately needed.