**Substitutes of leadership or non-substitutable leadership? First results from case studies in local government organizations in Lithuania and Germany**

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**Introduction and theoretical underpinnings**

Leadership in public administration organizations, especially in local governance institutions, belongs to one of the overlooked topics of leadership research with a general lack of interest in it lasting until recently (Vanderbeele et al. 2014: 79). In cases where this topic is considered, empirical results mainly stem from health care system (e.g. Knies and Leising 2014), building and research sector (e.g. Jacobsen and Andersen 2014) or police organizations. Empirical focus on local government institutions is quite seldom (e.g. Vermeeren et al. 2014).

Almost the same applies to the research on the so called "good governance", a perspective which dominates current discussion on local governance institutions. Here, research attempts are focusing either on citizens, the public or formal institutions, with codes of conduct, codes of social responsibility or ethical codes prescribing employees certain behavior toward the citizens being mainly focused in the research studies. Even if it has been shown in the research that leadership is of high importance for the behavior of employees, including compliance with the codes of ethics, the analysis of the everyday leadership practices in local government institutions is often missed.

Looking at previous literature on public and administrative leadership, quite contradictory tendencies can be observed. Two concepts seem to dominate the theoretical scene. On the one side, there is an assumption of public administration institutions providing strong substitutes for leadership, such as formal prescriptions, procedures and hierarchical structures (e.g. Bourantas and Papalexandris (1993). Here prevails the statement that in this kind of institutions effects of leadership behavior are significantly limited. As a result, the relevance of leadership in public administrative institutions is questioned. On the other side, the concept of transformational leadership has attracted heavily interest among scholars of public administration (e.g. Gabris et al. 1998, Ritz et al. 2014). In contrast to the substitutes of leadership, the transformational leadership concept postulates that leadership can exert high impact on employees because of visionary and transforming capacities of leaders.

These two contradictory theoretical positions regarding leadership in public sector on the one side and the fact that leadership processes in local government institutions have received only limited attention by scholars up to now on the other side, gave an impulse for our empirical study. The aim of the study as well as the expected contribution is twofold: first, to make an empirical contribution by describing and reflecting everyday leadership practices in local government institutions; special attention will be giving to the leadership practices which research participants perceived as "good" or "ethical" as well as potentially "unethical" and "bad". The second aim of the study is to explore the role of leadership substitutes in the context of local governance organizations more thoroughly and to contribute to the theory of leadership substitutes (Kerr and Jermier 1978) by providing context-specific insights from the public administration sector.
Method

We used theoretically informed case study approach. The cases are represented by departments of selected local government organizations in Germany and in Lithuania. There are considerable similarities as well as differences between both countries, which make an international comparison reasonable. Since the research in Germany takes place in the region which formerly belonged to the Eastern Germany, both countries represent two post-communist contexts. Despite of this similarity, local government systems of both countries have undergone highly idiosyncratic transformational processes in the last 25 years, resulting in quite different structures of local government. For example, there is a centralized power structure in German local government institutions with governing mayor being the chief head of the complete institution, whereas in Lithuania there is a dual power structure in communal organizations with governing mayor representing the holder of the political power and head of administration being the chief executive of administrative personnel.

The case studies are based on the interview material generated in personal interviews with heads of departments as well as their employees. Each case is based on at least two interviews up to four interviews. Interviews took place in the native language of the participants, since the project team consists of persons who are native speakers in Lithuanian and German languages. The aim of the study is to conduct six case studies in both countries. First results presented below are based on the initial material coming from three case studies or eight interviews.

Even if our approach is informed by the concept of leadership substitutes, in order to analyze our results we mainly apply grounded-theory perspective and look more or less inductively towards the issues of leadership substitution as well as situations suggesting the irreplaceability of leadership activities.

First results

Our analysis suggests that in everyday leadership practices in local government departments studied both tendencies coexist: substitutes for leadership and leadership activities which can be hardly substituted. The substitutes of leadership observed in interviews are quite similar in both countries; they range from high competency and professionalism of employees, autonomy on the workplace enabled by the heads of department or routines, plans and regular procedures, known by all employees and leading them in their work organization, to the technological solutions, such as system called “beehive”, used in the Lithuanian case studies (lt.: avilys), enabling a nearly automatic delivery of the tasks to the employees.

At the same time, our case studies demonstrate that there is a range of leadership practices beyond substitutes, such as information, consultation and advices provided by the heads of departments to their employees. Characteristically, such leadership behaviors are required by the employees or initiated by the leaders and seem to be situation-specific. There are at least two types of situations eliciting leadership acts beyond substitutes. First of them refers to the cases where employees are dealing with ambivalent or fuzzy information, publicly relevant issues or complaints made by citizens. Then, employees mainly working quite autonomously explicitly come back to their leaders not only in order to get their advice but in fact to ensure political “rear cover” by the leader. Even performance controls made by the
leader can be used by employees as a feedback and assertion of the rightness of the recommendations prepared by the employees, since leaders, not employees finally present this work in the communal committees as well as publicly and are made responsible for this. Second type of situations making leadership interventions beyond the substitutes relevant, are unpredictable and new issues or tasks requiring creative way of dealing which cannot be absorbed by the plan, routine or procedure as usual. Here, for example, leaders actively omit substitutes and assign the new task to the employees verbally instead of using "beehive" system mentioned above.

To sum it up, first results of our study show that substitutes of leadership and leadership practices beyond substitutes or activities where substitutes are explicitly omitted by leaders coexist in the everyday leadership in local government institutions. The implicit heroism enclosed in the concept of transformational leadership as well as the prevalence of leadership substitutes should be questioned if it comes to leadership in the context of public administration, especially in local government institutions. Instead, the coexistence or even dialectics between both sides of the public leadership coin should be explored furthermore by focusing on contextual, country-based as well as situational frames of everyday leadership activities.

References


