Foreword

I am pleased to provide a foreword to Public Sector Leadership, for I think this book responds to several extremely significant questions facing public management scholarship and practice today. Central among these is the importance of providing adequate leadership in the public, private and non-profit sectors. Most people would agree that, more than ever before, we need strong and effective leadership, both because there are things we need to accomplish and because we need to understand where we are going. In many ways, it seems, our lives are spinning out of control. The massive forces of globalization, political realignment and international terror seem to be overwhelming. Corporations, public organizations and non-profits seem to exist in a world of complexity and turbulence far more frenzied than we have experienced before. Even in our personal world the struggle to give our individual lives focus, to sort out the complexities of family life and social relationships and to cope with jobs, technology and information overload bear down upon us daily.

These conditions make it terribly difficult to get things done. For example, in the business world, economic conditions are moving so quickly that it’s hard to keep up. Markets are shifting overnight, corporations struggle to manage the flood of information that’s available and changes in technology are both rapid and remarkable, in either case calling for quick and accurate responses. Under these conditions the key to corporate survival is to be creative, adaptable and flexible enough to not only cope with changes in the environment but to successfully position one’s organization for success – despite the craziness.

But what’s true at the corporate level is no less true in the realm of governance, whether at the national or international level or the community level. In their excellent introduction to this book, Raffel, Leisink and Middlebrooks especially note the leadership challenges facing public organizations at the national and international levels. Similarly cities and towns struggle to take advantage of changes in the global economy so that they can grow and prosper, while at the same time they strive to enhance the quality of life for their citizens; all this amidst economic fluctuations, shifting revenues and stormy political conditions. Meanwhile, at the personal level, our individual lives and those of our families are being buffeted by similar changes, especially rapidly shifting social and economic
conditions. Families struggle to make a living, to pay for their children’s education and just to get out of debt. There are important things we need to be able to do at the corporate, the community and the personal level that are simply made more difficult by the conditions in which we live.

At each of these levels the turbulence that surrounds us has not only practical implications but also implications for our emotions and our values. Those who work in large corporations and governmental agencies need to have confidence that their leadership is going to do whatever necessary to maintain the integrity of those organizations. Those in local communities want to be sure that political and other leaders have the good of the community in mind and will be both ethical in their own behavior and responsive to the needs and interests of the citizens. And individuals and families want to be sure that they will survive, if not thrive, in the coming months and years. They must be able to encounter the future in a way consciously consistent with their values and ideals. There are many things that can contribute to the hope and confidence people need, religion, social interaction and civic engagement among them. But cutting across all these, effective leadership can help engender a sense of assurance that everything will be okay.

While it’s clear that effective and responsible leadership is needed more than ever before, many wonder where that kind of leadership might come from. Trust in government, trust in business and indeed trust in all major social institutions has declined dramatically in the past several decades. Cynicism about our leaders is rampant and many are viewed not as being helpful (much less inspiring), but at best providing comic relief from the problems we face. We are frustrated with the apparent lack of leadership in government, in corporations and throughout society, but we are also hard pressed to identify what the problem is. Some, including Warren Bennis, have come to speak of a leadership crisis in the USA and around the world. But that crisis is subtle, hard to identify. Bennis writes, ‘Unlike the possibility of plague or nuclear holocaust, the leadership crisis will probably not become the basis for a best-seller or a blockbuster movie, but in many ways it is the most urgent and dangerous of the threats we face today, if only because it is insufficiently recognized and little understood’ (Bennis 1997, p. 21).

To help us steer through these confounding times, we need improved leadership, but not just improved leadership at the top of our organizations or societies. Rather we need improved leadership at all levels. When we think of leaders, we think first of those in positions of power in society generally – the kings, the queens, the presidents, the prime ministers, the governors, the legislators and those who lead in our communities. Soon after we think of those in positions of power in major organizations, especially
those in business and industry – the CEOs of major corporations, those on boards of directors, the managers and the ‘bosses.’ We may also think of those who lead our churches, our schools and our civic organizations. We rarely think about the fact that each of us engages in acts of leadership almost daily, in our families, in small groups, at work and in all sorts of social gatherings.

What we are experiencing today is a need for leadership throughout society. John Gardner, former secretary of the US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare and a founder of Common Cause, has commented, ‘In this country leadership is dispersed among all segments of society and down through all levels, and the system simply won’t work as it should unless large numbers of people throughout society are prepared to take leaderlike action to make things work at their level’ (Gardner 1987, p. 1). So the call for improved leadership is not just a call to enhance leadership at the national level. It is instead a call for improved leadership throughout corporations, governments and non-profits, to say nothing of leadership in communities, religious organizations, and civic organizations, small groups of friends and neighbors and families.

That perspective presents special challenges to those seeking to enhance the leadership capacities of those in public organizations. Again Raffel, Leisink and Middlebrooks correctly point out the relative lack of attention to public leadership and the consequent need for greater attention to this area. But public sector leadership, or more broadly leadership in governance, presents several special challenges. Among these I would raise three issues in need of attention in the field generally, issues that are addressed in various parts of the present volume:

1. What is the difference between managing and leading – and what implications does that difference have for the ethics of the public service? We clearly recognize that managing and leading are different activities, that when you are managing you are doing one set of things and when you are leading you are doing another. But the field of public administration has been developed to prepare and to guide public managers not public leaders. So how do we teach managers to be leaders? And what changes does that mean in their roles and responsibilities? The mainstream version of our field has focused on management and how managers can be constrained to act in a way consistent with guidelines promulgated by political leaders. But if we now ask managers to lead, what must we then say about the role of initiative and direct responsiveness to the needs of the public on their part?

2. What is the difference between public leadership and civic leadership? As we noted earlier, the need today is for leadership to be exerted at
all levels. But that doesn’t just mean expanding the leadership capacities of government agencies alone, something that the phrase public leadership tends to imply. Rather it means as well engaging citizens and civic organizations in the quest for adequate solutions to problems encountered at their level, typically the level of the community. This suggests that we might explore further the idea of ‘civic leadership.’ How do we develop citizen leaders? How do public administrators interact effectively and responsibly with such citizen leaders? What is the relation between civic leadership, political leaders and leaders in administration? All of these questions, I would suggest, can only be answered in a new framework for considering public issues and public process: that which Janet Denhardt and I have called ‘the New Public Service.’

3. As the governance process, the steering of society, tends to be less a function of government action alone but instead becomes more and more dispersed among public, private, non-profit organizations and individual citizens as well as civic organizations, how do we bring leadership to this process? We are accustomed to thinking of leaders as those at the top of our organizations or our political structures. But in the new circumstances of governance, these positions don’t always exist. Rather issues are played out through an intricate process of bargaining, negotiation and conflict resolution involving many parties and many potential leaders. The familiar answer is that we need to develop a special brand of leadership for these circumstances: leadership when no one is in charge. While that is true, it becomes even more complex when the parties involved in what are hopefully cooperative relations extend across national boundaries, indeed across the globe. Now the matter is complicated by the fact that different groups may bring different perspectives on leadership and even different perspectives on the ethics of leadership to the table. Some cultures expect and approve more hierarchical styles of leadership than others, for example. How can we construct a common understanding of leadership which enables us to work together? Is it possible that a new concept of leadership not based on power and position provides an answer? And how can we find acceptance of that understanding of leadership as a basis for leading across groups and cultures?

I pose these issues as challenges to the field of public leadership, but happily they are challenges that are already being taken up by thoughtful scholars and practitioners around the globe; indeed, many are addressed in the pages of this book. Certainly by raising the significance of public leadership and by bringing together such a talented and insightful group
of commentators from around the world, the editors of *Public Sector Leadership* have done a remarkable service. I would suggest, however, that what is contained here is itself a challenge, a challenge to other scholars and other practitioners to think carefully about these issues and to help develop approaches to leadership that will not only allow us to better address the problems we face, whether locally or internationally, but to do so in a way that contributes to building public trust and confidence in the work we do. My congratulations to the editors and contributors to this volume for making an important first step in that direction.

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REFERENCES