

Five key characteristics of the 21st century public manager

Imagine being a public manager today. Unpredictable and ambiguous events such as Brexit, Donald Trump's election, the assertive rise of non-Western powers, and rapid, volatile economic and technological changes affect your daily work. Increasingly, you operate in a VUCA world, characterized by *volatility*, *uncertainty*, *complexity*, and *ambiguity*, as the popular managerial acronym goes. The VUCA world offers many challenges but at the same time exciting opportunities for achieving unprecedented levels of public service excellence, together with citizens and vanguards of change from other sectors. Effective 21st century public managers need to acquire and display a variety of skillsets and mindsets to turn various new challenges into immense opportunities for innovation and excellence.

In particular, such managers will have to embody five key characteristics:

1. **Smart, savvy, and astute:** 21st century public managers will not thrive in a VUCA world because of seniority, or because they were designated as important or powerful in the past. They cannot simply command respect and authority from their environment. They will only continue to gain such respect and authority by being *smart* – at least as smart as their various counterparts; *savvy* – in leveraging opportunities and technologies to outperform competitors and convince masters; and *astute* – in strategically securing support and funding from their various authorizing environments. Rather than using either hard power or soft power skills, they need to use “smart power” as former Harvard Dean Joseph Nye argues, combining IQ, EQ, and CQ or contextual intelligence.
2. **Entrepreneurial while maintaining a strong public service ethos:** 21st century public managers also have to be entrepreneurial, to some extent even commercial, in seeking out opportunities and starting ventures across sectors. In doing this, public managers have to walk a fine line. They must be entrepreneurial but cannot become full-blooded entrepreneurs chasing a limited group of profitable or ‘easy’ clients. Instead, they must smartly target certain segments of stakeholders in the early stages of new projects, pilots, and idea generation – early adaptors – without losing sight of accessibility for all segments of society at a later stage. Public managers need to be competent in differentiating between stakeholders to optimally achieve various objectives, and can emulate sophisticated marketing, survey, and sales techniques from their private sector counterparts.
3. **Collaborative and connected, yet authoritative in content and style:** 21st century public managers realize they won't get anything done by being hierarchical, silo-ed, protectionist, and monopolistic. They have to be able to ‘let go’: to invite, enable and allow others to participate in processes of public problem solving, increasingly including laymen citizens. At the same time, however, authority, responsibility, and accountability for addressing social issues will largely remain with public managers and their political masters. Public managers can only successfully fulfil the obligations and mandates such authority entails if they are granted *informal* authority and legitimacy by their various partners. These have to be continuously earned through excellent performance; enabling, energizing leadership; and a sufficient display of expertise and content knowledge.
4. **Active anticipators of what matters now as well as in the future(s):** 21st century public managers must simultaneously manage the ‘political scoring logic’ in an era of never-ending news cycles while building multiple long-term scenarios and analytical models to anticipate VUCA events. They have to convincingly operate on various stages, both in the spotlight as well as behind the scenes. 21st century public managers will find ways to connect both logics and timelines, by showing political masters and other key stakeholders how investing in long-term planning and anticipation will *also* help them to do better in the ‘now’, to address and account for crises and scandals. In addition, they make the process of conducting foresight exercises accessible, meaningful, and inclusive, and tap into the opportunities that technology and crowd sourcing

provide. They recognize and appreciate the differences between amateur and expert contributions and communicate transparently about such differences to various stakeholders.

5. **Generalist specialists who never stop learning:** 21st century public managers have both generic as well as specialist skills and competencies. They are able to rapidly and frequently switch between roles, sectors, projects, networks, and issues. They go in-depth when necessary, mastering a dynamic set of skills such as developing social media platforms and campaigns, designing apps for service delivery that improve user experience, and designing and negotiating complex partnerships contracts with a range of stakeholders. Mastering such a wide and dynamic range of skills requires a mindset attuned to lifelong learning. This learning can take place through frequent executive courses (managerial and technical), internships, exchanges, and cross-sectoral job rotation. 'Generalist specialists' realize that their initial training will only partly determine where they will end up and how their careers will unfold. 21st century public managers can start out as specialists while acquiring management and leaderships skills through executive training during their careers, or can get a generalist degree that prepares them for a wide range of roles and then acquire technical skills through on-the-job modules.

Dr Zeger van der Wal is Associate Professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore, and Affiliate Chair Professor at Leiden University. He is the author of *The 21st Century Public Manager*, published with Palgrave Macmillan.