

# **No Master of Puppets: Leading Civil Servants in Collaborative Innovation**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Typologies of leadership styles indicate that there are vast differences in the way superiors guide their employees in collaborative innovation projects. In this article, we study how civil servants have a different experience of organisational leadership styles. More specifically, we aim to discover what determines how civil servants experience different types of organisational leadership in a collaborative innovation context. Therefore, we explore whether the different phases of the collaborative innovation process (preparation, idea generation and selection, implementation) affect how civil servants experience leadership. This study draws on the leadership literature in the context of public-sector collaborative innovation, and on studies identifying civil servants' needs throughout collaborative innovation projects. In our empirical research, we interview 29 subordinates and 11 superiors engaged in collaborative innovation projects. Our study contributes to the innovation literature that civil servants' attitudes towards innovation (being a risk-taker, rule-follower, or collaborator) affect what type of organisational leadership (facilitating, intervening and passive/avoidant leadership) they experience as most helpful when engaging in collaborative innovation. Our results show that the phases of the innovation process only determine to a limited extent what type of leadership civil servants experience as most helpful.

**Key words:** collaborative innovation, public-sector innovation, collaboration, leadership, performance

### **Introduction**

Collaborative innovation is gaining ground as a way of addressing the many wicked problems our societies face today. Collaboration with citizens, other governmental organizations, businesses, non-profit organisations, interest groups, and other stakeholders can offer government organisations different perspectives as well as additional resources and expertise to help tackle these issues (Sørensen and Torfing, 2011; Munro, 2020). Yet how collaborative innovation is best fostered at the organisational level still requires further research (Wegrich, 2019). Furthermore, Ricard et al (2017) report a gap in mainstream leadership literature when it comes to studies that take into account how the context of specific collaborative innovation affects leadership requirements.

The current academic literature describes collaborative innovation as a specific kind of innovation that is a direct result of “the networked collaboration of multiple stakeholders” and that produces “outcomes that are deemed valuable and desirable by the key stakeholders”

(Sørensen and Torfing, 2011: 43-8; 861). It is important to note that not every collaborative network creates innovative outcomes, or even aims to do so. Similarly, not every innovation is created by a collaborative network. In sum, **collaborative innovation** is a concept that describes an innovation whose outcome should be something new and should bring benefits in practice (cf. De Vries, Bekkers and Tummers, 2016). **Collaborative** refers to a situation where “two or more actors engage in a constructive management of differences in order to define common problems and develop joint solutions based on provisional agreements that may coexist with disagreement and dissent” (Hartley, Sørensen and Torfing, 2013: 73-6; 826).

Multiple studies point out that leadership is important to innovation (Lewis, Ricard and Klijn, 2018; Wegrich, 2019). Yet, a study by Lewis et al (2018) found that the link between leadership and innovation in the public sector is not yet well developed. A recent study by Lopes and Farias (2020) added that very few empirical studies address leadership in the collaborative innovation process. Still, the collaborative aspects pressure civil servants in other ways than regular innovation does, as the civil servants have to overcome additional obstacles such as different views, conflicts of interest, network issues... (Crosby, ‘t Hart and Torfing, 2017). Studying how civil servants are best prepared and supported by their superiors to do this, is therefore an important topic of research. Yet the civil servants’ perspective on these differences in leadership has never been the focus of research. Given the importance of civil servants in executing collaborative innovation projects, however (Mergel, 2018), their perspective should be taken into account. Their experiences are not just useful to fill a void in the current academic literature; they are of great value for practitioners as well.

This research therefore would like to place the civil servants’ experience at the focal point of the study using in-depth interviews. Specifically, we aim to discover what determines how civil servants experience organisational leadership in a collaborative innovation context. We hope to identify different types of leadership, experienced by the civil servants, and aim to explore what determines whether the civil servants experience different types of leadership as positive or negative. As a potential explanation, we observe different phases of the collaborative innovation process (preparation, idea generation and selection, implementation) (cf. Eggers and Singh, 2009), in order to see if civil servants experience leadership types differently depending on the project phase. This assumption is based on research that indicates that drivers and barriers are distinct during the different phases of the innovation process (Cinar, Trott and Simms, 2019).

The article first offers a brief overview of the literature on different types of leadership in a collaborative innovation context. Next, it discusses what kind of support civil servants need from their superiors throughout the different phases in collaborative innovation projects. Then, building on the analysis of data from 40 interviews, the study offers a new perspective on what determines how civil servants experience organisational leadership in a collaborative innovation context.

## **State of the art**

This State of the art section opens with a brief overview of the literature that links leadership to (collaborative) innovation, followed by a section on the superior-subordinate

dynamic in this respect. Finally, the third section focusses on the research regarding the needs of civil servants in collaborative innovation projects.

### ***Leadership and innovation***

Within innovation research, authors present a plethora of leadership studies (e.g. Lewis et al, 2014; Ricard et al, 2017; Munro, 2020). Earlier studies in both public- and private-sector research distinguish between transactional, transformational and passive-avoidant leadership (Bass, 1981; Molero, Moriano and Shaver, 2013; Ricard et al, 2017). In this typology, transactional leadership is characterised by a top-down exchange between superiors and subordinates. This exchange is generally driven by rational incentives. In transformational leadership, the charisma and legitimacy of the superior are key, and more attention is paid to the relationship between superior and subordinate (Ricard et al, 2017). Lastly, passive-avoidant leadership is a lesser-studied form of leadership. It is characterised by a leader who is absent when needed (Molero, Moriano and Shaver, 2013).

The transformational leadership concept has inspired scholars in social innovation and collaborative innovation research. Ricard et al (2017) built on this typology as they assessed leadership types for collaborative innovation in three municipalities. They identified interpersonal leadership, entrepreneurial leadership and network governance leadership as well as transactional and transformational leadership. Here, each type of leader approaches challenges from a different perspective. Crosby, 't Hart and Torfing (2017) turned the page on transformational leadership and suggested post-transformational thinking. They examined the types of leadership that are most likely to foster collaborative innovation and public value creation.

Another typology was created by Lewis et al (2014) as they observed nine different leadership profiles for increasing organisational innovation capacity in the public sector: short-term leaders, risk-averse leaders, collaborators, knowledgeable leaders, risk-takers, motivators, rule-followers, bureaucrats and problem-solvers. While these are distinct types, some of these profiles have some core characteristics in common. Their research shows that different attitudes and personal characteristics result in different leadership types.

A separate study identified the ways a leader can act, in the context of a Danish municipality (Agger and Sørensen, 2014). In addition, authors put forward concepts such as ambidextrous leadership (Rosing, Frese and Bausch, 2011; Lopes and Farias, 2020), change leadership (van der Voet, 2016) and empowering leadership (Fernandez and Moldogaziev, 2010; Fachrunnisa et al, 2019) as affecting innovation.

What these recent typologies have in common, is that most of the described leadership types are directly related to known drivers or barriers of collaborative innovation. Looking at the typology by Lewis et al (2014), motivation, risk aversion and knowledge are all closely connected to innovation, regardless of whether they are linked to stakeholders, subordinates or leaders (Mergel, 2018; Munro, 2020). Similarly, starting from the typology by Crosby et al (2017): resources (e.g. sponsors), momentum (e.g. catalysts) and implementation (e.g. implementers) are known to play a vital role in innovation; and can be brought on by various types of actors as well (Cinar, Trott and Simms, 2019; Lopes and Farias, 2020).

Thus, whereas the original leadership typology by Bass (1981) was mutually exclusive, the post-transformational perspectives on leadership appear to focus on the conditions for collaborative innovation and how these conditions can be linked to leadership. The result is that leadership as a concept is taken beyond the organisational boundaries (e.g. network context) (Crosby, ‘t Hart and Torfing, 2017), beyond management positions (any inspirational civil servant can be a leader) (Ricard et al, 2017), and beyond hierarchical relationships (leadership is seen in terms of roles, not in terms of hierarchical interaction) (Lewis et al, 2014). Most of the research that focusses on leadership in the context of collaborative innovation, studies leadership or governance of the entire collaborative network rather than leadership at the organisational level (Lewis et al, 2014; Crosby, ‘t Hart and Torfing, 2017; Lopes and Farias, 2020). Leadership of collaborative innovations is called metagovernance (Sørensen, 2014). As a result, studies on organisational leadership in the context of collaborative innovation are limited.

### ***Civil servants and their leader***

While leadership research can be found in collaborative innovation literature, it has been conducted without special attention to the subordinate perspective. Yet, in private-sector innovation research, the value of situational leadership is underscored. Vroom and Jago (2007) put forward that leadership should be treated as a variable that can cause individual subordinate behaviour. The effects of subordinate characteristics are emphasised in their study. This confirms findings by Deluga (1990) and Rosing et al (2011), that appropriate leadership behaviour is dependent on the individual follower and the specifics of the situation.

Warah (2002) wrote in a public-sector context that leadership should be a more relational process, and that interactivity leads to better results. Walls (2019) also found in healthcare innovation research that innovation performance is better when leaders modify their behaviour to suit individual needs. Yet even though the public-sector leadership research emphasises the need for empowering leadership and a good leader-member exchange (Fachrunnisa et al, 2019), any mention of the subordinate perspective on leadership in collaborative innovation is currently limited to marginal notes such as “personalities, attitudes and mutual chemistry matter a great deal,” (Munro, 2020: 40-4; 324) and “Innovation clearly emanates from the leader and his/her ability to steer subordinates” (Ricard et al, 2017: 19-2; 137).

### ***The needs of civil servants***

There is no overview in the present literature on what subordinates need from their organisational leaders in the context of collaborative innovation, yet we do find some concrete needs that civil servants experience in a collaborative innovation context, for which help from their supervisors could be beneficial.

The following overview of these needs is categorised by the phase in the collaborative innovation process in which they occur, starting with the preparatory phase. We include this phase in our analysis, since various studies refer to challenges civil servants face before the collaborative innovation project is launched (Verschuere, Brandsen and Pestoff, 2012; Cinar, Trott and Simms, 2019). For the other phases (idea generation and selection, implementation), we refer to the innovation cycle by Eggers and Singh (2009), which is generally referred to in innovation research (Bommert, 2010; Sørensen and Torfing, 2011).

### *Needs surrounding the preparation of collaborative innovation*

In preparing collaborative innovation projects, superiors can make a difference for civil servants in the importance they ascribe to a project and in their willingness to let the civil servant invest in it (Mandell and Steelman, 2003). A first challenge civil servants face is information acquisition. The more external insight civil servants can gather, the better they are equipped for a project (Verschuere, Brandsen and Pestoff, 2012). If a superior deems a project important, they can support subordinates by providing the necessary time and documentation, or by offering training to provide the civil servant with a specific expertise/skillset (e.g. on working with vulnerable target groups in co-production) (Cinar, Trott and Simms, 2019).

Another difference superiors can make in this phase is related to networking. Rather than acting as a constant intermediate, superiors can share their network with the subordinates and improve the civil servants' connective capacity both inside the organisation and inside the project network. The support, advice and help of a superior can go a long way in successful networking (Gieske, van Buuren and Bekkers, 2016).

### *Needs related to idea generation and selection*

To what extent the civil servant plays a role in idea generation and selection of the most promising option(s), partially depends on the relationship between superior and subordinate. Munro (2020) explains that civil servants need their superior to create an environment in which fresh thinking and honesty are encouraged, to make the success of collaborations more likely. When civil servants are invited to develop their own ideas, this tends to elicit more innovative behaviour from them (Ricard et al, 2017). Being part of the idea selection also increases the chance that individuals support these ideas, which positively affects their motivation (Munro, 2020). A strict environment with a superior that runs a zero-error culture has the opposite effect. It acts as a barrier to idea generation in collaborative innovation (Sørensen and Torfing, 2011).

The work environment of civil servants also strongly affects their ability to generate ideas indirectly. Job satisfaction makes innovative behaviour more likely (De Vries, Bekkers and Tummers, 2016). Job insecurity, in contrast, is negatively related to idea generation since it creates severe stress and directs energy towards the regulation of emotions at the cost of directing it to the generation of alternative ideas (Niesen et al, 2018). Therefore, a positive work environment (which is strongly affected by the leadership in the organisation), makes for an important indirect need of civil servants in collaborative innovation (De Vries, Bekkers and Tummers, 2016; Niesen et al, 2018).

### *Needs related to implementation*

With respect to challenges in the implementation stage of collaborative innovations, various aspects play a role. Making sufficient resources available (Bommert, 2010) and mobilising the right resources (Ricard et al, 2017) are important drivers in implementing innovations. Without time and energy, projects fall flat and are more likely to be discontinued (Munro, 2020). Civil servants are thus highly dependent on how resources are assigned by superiors. Moreover, the autonomy and flexibility civil servants are given to quickly and adequately respond when the project requires it, can be crucial to the success of collaborative innovation (Sørensen and Torfing, 2011).

A common issue civil servants face in implementation are obstacles. Collaborating with stakeholders who are not part of the public sector can create issues, for example in terms of shared responsibility (Bommert, 2010). Civil servants can require someone in a superior position to vouch for certain risks and offer some flexibility regarding rules that are unproductive to the collaborative innovation (Van Damme and Brans, 2012; Voorberg, Bekkers and Tummers, 2013). They can require help with obstacles such as bureaucratic routines, or time pressure (Byron, Khazanchi and Nazarian, 2010). This emphasis on empowerment practises and autonomy is underscored by Fernandez and Moldogaziev (2011), who explain that civil servants need a mandate to take action in order to solve the problems they face.

## **Methodology**

For this research, we opted for in-depth interviews in terms of data collection. This open approach supports the explorative nature of our research. The interviews were semi-structured and included a range of questions about the respondents' involvement throughout the project and its challenges. In addition, there was elaborate questioning about how superiors helped or hindered their employees' functioning in the respective projects.

The data was collected from three cases. In the first case, respondents were gathered from the sustainability program (A) in which actors from all Belgian federal governmental departments collaborated. Before this project, there was no real approach for sustainable development, and actions were fragmented or non-existent in this regard. In the second case, mothers in poverty (B), the innovation was a radically different approach to fighting poverty that set itself apart because of its holistic and intense guidance of single mothers. Before, there was no real guidance on tackling poverty itself, and the mothers only received periodic financial support. In case three, experts by experience (C), federal departments enlisted persons (with largely low levels of education) with a background of poverty and social exclusion as experts by experience to detect issues and recommend changes to the departments' ways of working on social inclusion. This strategy was completely new in this context.

The three cases were selected from a list of recent collaborative innovation cases in the Belgian public sector. Cases A and C were selected based on the diversity of sectors the superiors and subordinates worked on (healthcare, transport, pensions, social inclusion, etc.). In this way, we wanted to avoid the bias of only interviewing civil servants working in the same field. In addition, cases B and C were selected because they offered the opportunity to interview multiple civil servants working for the same superior, in addition to the superior in question. While it would have been ideal to have all cases situated in a multi-sector context with access to multiple subordinates and all their supervisors, the limited availability of accessible collaborative innovation cases in the Belgian public sector made this impossible. Other selection criteria were that the cases had to be ongoing at the time of study and had to have gone through the preparation, idea generation and selection, and implementation stages. In this way, the cases were conducted in the same political climate and respondents could report on changes throughout the innovation process. In addition, all subordinates in the study had to have experienced at least one performance review by their supervisor since their active engagement in the project.

All main stakeholders in the collaborative networks were invited for an interview. The list of stakeholders was compiled by the project coordinator and each respondent was invited to make additions to this list. In the end, the data was gathered from 29 civil servants in a subordinate position and 11 civil servants in a superior position. The subordinate respondents were all actively engaged in a project of collaborative innovation. Any superiors interviewed, all extended their leadership to one or more respondents in the study. We found no occasion where respondents with the same superior disagreed on the type of leadership their superior employed. The way subordinates described the leadership style of their superior matched the way superiors described their own leadership style in all situations except one. There, the subordinate described the superior as passive, while the superior reported a more facilitating leadership style.

## **Data analysis and results**

All interview transcripts were inductively coded and analysed using NVivo 11. In the process of coding, we derived two clusters of nodes (collections of references about a specific theme). One cluster referred to needs civil servants had throughout the collaborative innovation project. The second cluster referred to leadership characteristics. Three different types of leaders could be recognised in the descriptions of respondents. These types differed in the level of involvement on the part of the superior in the subordinate's work in relation to the project; ranging from passive leadership, facilitating leadership, to intervening leadership.

In a second round of coding, we specifically focused on interview excerpts where respondents in a subordinate position advised how (positively or negatively) they experienced various aspects of leadership. Subordinates could not consistently link two of the leadership styles we identified in our data to either a positive or a negative evaluation. Nor could we confidently link the phases of the innovation cycle in which subordinates struggled, with specific aspects they valued in the leadership style of their superior. On the contrary, the type of leadership subordinates experienced as most positive barely changed from one collaborative innovation phase to another.

Yet there was one situation where two subordinates ascribed similar characteristics to a superior they shared (hands-on and involved), but experienced this differently. While one (highly entrepreneurial) subordinate perceived this as hindering for collaborative innovation, the other (risk-averse) subordinate experienced this as helpful. Therefore, we coded all transcripts of respondents in a subordinate position additionally for their attitude towards collaborative innovation. We found a clear link between these attitudes and the way the civil servants experienced their superior's leadership style.

In the next section; we explain how each of the three leadership types presented themselves in our data, and how they were experienced by the subordinates throughout the different phases.

### ***Intervening leadership***

Intervening leadership was experienced as a hierarchical and directive leadership style. Superiors who were seen as intervening, generally handled the preparation phase alone, being the



intermediate between the subordinate and the project partners. In the idea generation phase they developed at least part of the project content themselves. They also chose which ideas were eventually selected. During implementation, they set out the planning/budget/etc. and were more likely than other superiors to take the project out of their employees' hands in case of conflict. The following quote from a civil servant exemplifies this leadership style: "Everything was already decided, they told me what to do, when and how." (Respondent 0611).

*How was it experienced by the civil servants throughout the different phases?*

With this type of leadership, less input was given to the civil servants in the pre-implementation phases. This tended to frustrate some, since they ended up in a collaborative team that met regularly and had expectations of them, without the subordinate ever signing up for this. This was the case with respondent R0705: "Nothing is voluntary, I am responsible for subject X (...) so I had no choice but to take the project on" (R0705).

Here, it is clear from the language used that enthusiasm for collaborating in the project was not instantaneous. This respondent preferred doing his day-to-day job instead. Yet in the end, he saw the value of the project and did not mind being part of it anymore. Overall, the evaluation of intervening leadership was mixed. For most, having limited choices was frustrating; especially for entrepreneurial civil servants. Yet, some risk-averse civil servants ended up appreciating their participation in a project they would not have stepped into on their own initiative.

During implementation, issues arose in the form of blockages. Many respondents reported that they needed a certain level of trust in order to confide in their superior about problems they faced. In the case of intervening leadership, the relationship between superior and subordinate was at times too hierarchical for this: "Here, people do not dare to report people who do nothing and that is a problem," respondent (R0704) explained, pointing to the fact that he did not feel his superior was someone he could talk to. Respondent R0613 struggled with the same issue and reported an unfavourable workplace environment: "One of us was unhappy with the way things were done but she did not feel like she could provide input or simply change assignments, so she tried to show that she was unhappy and that caused a lot of stress" - (R0613).

Here, R0613 describes a situation where her colleague performed badly for months, hampering the project, simply because the colleague could not directly communicate that the assignment was a bad match for her.

Yet intervening leadership was also positively experienced. One respondent (R0511) got in trouble after the implementation, when an unexpected crisis with a citizen stakeholder threatened to derail a project event. A superior noticed this, intervened and took over. The respondent was very happy about this, since she felt she could not handle the problem herself, and preferred focusing on the project goals rather than on crisis management.

Lastly, in terms of evaluating the work of subordinates in the project, intervening leadership was mostly seen as positive. Intervening leaders generally set out clear expectations. In addition, the intervening approach meant that supervisors were able to notice and praise efforts and accomplishments. This was perceived as motivational. Nevertheless, this positive effect only existed when superiors supported the projects their civil servants were assigned to. When they did

not, the interventions made it hard for subordinates to do any work for the project as exemplified in the following quote:

I have to admit that my engagement in the project would in no way positively affect my evaluation. On the contrary, my hierarchical superior let me know that I had to spend less time on it. - (R0716).

### ***Facilitating leadership***

Facilitating leadership with its hands-on, but limited intervention, allowed civil servants more freedom to develop ideas and define their role in a project, as reflected in the following quote: “My boss gives us a lot of discretionary room to come up with our own ideas and be innovative” (R0602). Regarding the preparation phase, facilitating superiors generally provided their subordinates with access to their own project network and information resources (e.g. training) so they could work independently. The facilitating superiors also granted more autonomy in terms of the implementation phase by offering freedom in time allocation and by empowering their civil servants to resolve issues independently.

#### *What was the experience of the civil servants throughout the different phases?*

This type of leadership was usually much appreciated by respondents during preparation and idea generation of the project. It offered civil servants support, while still allowing them autonomy. The following quote illustrates how this type of leadership presented itself:

[Even before they involved us in the project] we were offered coaching [=specialised training], (...) from someone who could help us communicate better and would stand by us in case of conflicts. It was a real support. - (R0612).

The approach ensured that the respondent, who had an open mind concerning collaborative innovation but felt insecure about her abilities, felt reassured and empowered. Later in the interview, R0612 explained that the support of the superior had made her realise she could do more than she initially thought possible.

A second quote illustrates facilitating leadership during implementation: “[When I presented my ideas for the project], my superior was instantly on board (...) he took his phone within the next five minutes [and made all the arrangements] after which the proposal could be launched” (R0606). Here, the respondent who benefitted from the leadership approach was extremely motivated. She reported to be very happy with the autonomy she had to work out ideas, and even happier to see how her superior took note of those ideas and helped her to put them into practice.

Still, autonomy did not necessarily go hand in hand with follow-through by superiors to help execute ideas. As a result, some civil servants were free to develop their own ideas, only to see their work rejected in the implementation phase. “It is important to have autonomy and to have the possibility to make proposals, but if they are put in the garbage eventually, then it is even more discouraging afterwards” (R0708), a respondent clarified.

In terms of problem-solving in collaborative innovations, opinions from civil servants on facilitating leadership were mixed. Here is a positive example: “We had some problems and I mentioned them to my superior, then, he set up a meeting with all actors involved and we talked until a solution was found” (R0610). Here, a facilitating leader, who allowed his subordinates autonomy, stepped in and helped when support was needed. The subordinate in question was happy to provide input and develop a project, but felt that support was needed in specific situations and was happy to receive it.

However, not all facilitating leaders acted this way. Some considered issues in a project the civil servant’s responsibility. This disappointed some respondents: “[We had a problem] but they did not stick up for us and didn’t go to the steering committee to defend things, it’s a shame!” (R0706). This civil servant appreciated a certain level of autonomy, but did not know how to handle the situation and detailed in the interview that he could have used more intervention.

### ***Passive leadership***

Across the cases, there were several reports of superiors who had a hands-off style and practically never intervened in the work of their subordinates in the project. They were largely uninvolved in their employees’ engagement in the project across all phases. With regard to assessing the subordinate’s work in the project, they could not criticise or praise the work of the civil servant, because they often had no proper understanding of the project or its requirements. The reasons for this passive leadership varied. At times, a project was given to a department against the will of the superior and then handed off to one of the subordinates. Other times the superiors were too busy to keep up with all projects in their department. “To be honest, I am not sure I can give you any information” one respondent explained. “Yes, I am her superior, but I am not really up-to-date on the project since I have many subordinates” (R0608) he continued.

### *What was the experience of the civil servants throughout the different phases?*

In terms of the effects of this kind of leadership, there was virtually no involvement from the superior across the different phases. Respondents reported experiences ranging from neutral to negative. No respondent reported that the lack of a supervisor’s involvement was truly beneficial. Risk-averse civil servants found that facilitating leaders left them with too many choices, but passive leadership was even more detrimental for them. And those who experienced passive leadership as neither positive nor negative were mostly employees with a very independent attitude. They reported that the approach had the same benefits with regard to autonomy as facilitating leadership, yet without the benefits of having someone to support them if necessary; and with the additional stress of having many responsibilities without having support or being rewarded for a positive performance.

This lack of support was an even greater burden to less entrepreneurial civil servants, who preferred trying things out knowing that they could fall back on the help and advice of a superior. The following quote explains this issue:

[R0506] had to figure it all out while the project was already ongoing. [She] had to discover what her personal boundaries were, how she had to organise things, who her partners were... - (R0508).

The civil servant (R0506) who is mentioned by the project coordinator (R0508) in this quote, was dropped into a project head first, without guidelines or advice on how to best approach the project goals. This meant that while civil servants from other organisations could start the project well-prepared, civil servant R0506 had to find out how to shape the project through a process of trial and error and as a result lost valuable time according to the project coordinator (R0508). R0506's direct supervisor also failed to help whenever there was a challenge that blocked the project. "Whenever there is an issue, that's it. My direct supervisor does not offer any support and I am left alone to deal with it" (R0506). Not only did this discourage the civil servant, it also made her more risk-averse, as she avoided getting into challenging situations from then on.

## **Discussion**

From our data, three distinguishable organisational leadership styles could be identified within a context of collaborative innovation: intervening leaders, facilitating leaders, and passive leaders. The first type, passive leaders, offered little to no direction to their subordinates in terms of their engagement in the collaborative innovation project. They engaged in a form of laissez-faire leadership (cf. Deluga, 1990; Molero, Moriano and Shaver, 2013) and were experienced as absent. Since current research is focussed on leadership types which enable (collaborative) innovation (Ricard et al, 2017), and since there is a consensus that this requires active forms of leadership, there is little to no attention paid to the passive leadership in current collaborative innovation research. Yet the leadership type is part of Bass's original typology (Bass, 1981; Molero, Moriano and Shaver, 2013) as explained in the state of the art.

While passive leadership is barely studied in collaborative innovation literature, the opposite is true for the facilitating leadership style described by the respondents. Especially in network literature, facilitative leadership is often put forward as highly conducive to collaborative innovation (Wegrich, 2019; Munro, 2020). However, the leadership style is then seen from a metagovernance perspective (Wegrich, 2019). The facilitating superiors in our study facilitate the subordinate's engagement in the network and instead of enhancing the self-governance of the network, their aim is to empower the subordinate (cf. Fernandez and Moldogaziev, 2010).

For the intervening leadership that respondents identified, the concept of transactional leadership (Bass, 1981; Molero, Moriano and Shaver, 2013) appears to be a partial equivalent, because intervening leadership is also described as a directive form of leadership, marked by a hierarchical exchange between superior and subordinate. Linking this to the collaborative innovation research, the leadership style has some elements in common with the role of institutional design in Sørensen's (2014) model, as it refers to metagovernors managing the project by adding meaning and incentives. They intervene and aim to influence decisions. In our study, this is exemplified by actions on the part of intervening supervisors. In both cases, incentives and strong intervention are applied.

### ***The needs of civil servants***

Contrary to our expectations, we found that the types of challenges civil servants encounter throughout the different phases of collaborative innovation projects only determine the way they experience their superior's leadership style to a limited extent. When it came to the preparation phase and idea generation, civil servants largely appeared to base their leadership preferences on their attitudes towards collaborative innovation (risk-averse civil servants preferring more intervention, entrepreneurial civil servants favouring more freedom). Yet when it came to idea selection, there was generally a slightly higher inclination amongst all types of civil servants for wanting greater autonomy and thus more of a facilitating leadership style. Aspects such as project conflicts or performance evaluations created a greater need for deeper involvement, however, thus making interventions (and thus a more intervening leadership style) preferable. Yet overall, reports of changes in preferences brought on by these different phases remained limited.

While the needs described in the state of the art such as having a superior recognise the importance of the project (Mandell and Steelman, 2003), having a superior's help in networking (Gieske, van Buuren and Bekkers, 2016), being part of the idea selection (Munro, 2020), having an open culture (Sørensen and Torfing, 2011), having a superior make sufficient resources available (Bommert, 2010) and having a superior help with obstacles such as bureaucratic routines or time pressure (Byron, Khazanchi and Nazarian, 2010) did prove to be important across our four cases, their importance was mostly related to the attitude of the civil servants towards collaborative innovation, rather than the phase of the innovation process the civil servants reported on.

### ***No master of puppets***

An important point to take away from this research is that civil servants come with their own attitudes and are no puppet-like executors of orders from above. From our data, we can identify different civil servant profiles. It is difficult, however, to fall back on the literature to categorise these profiles. Bourgault and Van Dorpe (2013) studied the role identity of civil servants, but their research is linked to neither collaboration nor innovation.

We find that the attitudes of civil servants across our cases are a good fit for some of the personality types identified by Lewis et al (2014). They discovered different leadership types in different European cities: motivator/risk-taker, short-term and risk-averse leader in Copenhagen; motivator/risk-taker, collaborator and knowledgeable leader in Rotterdam, and risk-taker, motivator and rule-follower in Barcelona. Some of these attitudes have overlapping characteristics (e.g. motivator and risk-taker). We find that this typology is not limited to superiors and some of these attributes can be identified in civil servants in a subordinate position as well. Based on the items they used in their research, we recognised three types of civil servants in our study: risk-takers (often possessing elements of motivators as well), collaborators and rule-followers (often possessing elements of risk-aversion).

The risk-takers in our study are entrepreneurial, independent civil servants with an open attitude towards collaborative innovation. They are fond of autonomy, and keen to contribute to a project with their own ideas (cf. Munro, 2020). Yet compared to other civil servants, it is less important for them whether their superior recognises the importance of the project (cf. Mandell

and Steelman, 2003). When they believe in the project themselves, they are motivated. An illustrative quote in this respect came from respondent R0606: “On my first day I already had a ton of suggestions on changes (...) I will bring this department to do the maximum [for vulnerable citizens].”

The rule-followers in our study are problem-oriented civil servants who are most comfortable when following procedures. They have a more sceptical attitude towards collaborative innovation. “First do no harm” is more important to them than taking a leap of faith towards a potentially better outcome, as explained by respondent R0507: “You have to think long and hard before you change something. It’s fashionable all this innovating, but sometimes it is a big waste of time and people better just do their [regular] job.” Following Voorberg, Bekkers and Tummers (2013), such individuals can be described as risk-averse. Therefore, it was very important to them whether or not the superior recognised the importance of the project (cf. Mandell and Steelman, 2003). In addition, they needed their superior to help with obstacles such as bureaucratic routines, or time pressure (cf. Byron, Khazanchi and Nazarian, 2010).

Apart from these risk-takers and rule-followers, a large part of the respondents has less extreme attitudes towards collaborative innovation: the collaborators. They have a more long-term perspective than rule-followers and are more willing to implement new ideas; but they are not as likely as the risk-takers to stick their necks out (cf. Lewis, 2014). An example is respondent R0510: “I need some assurance at first, but if [name of superior] says that she believes in my plan and we analyse the plan with the team, then there is no stopping me (...).” In general, their reported leadership needs are strongly in line with those of the risk-takers since they value autonomy greatly. Yet they differ from risk-takers in the added emphasis they place on receiving support. Other examples of what they needed from their superiors were help in networking (cf. Gieske, van Buuren and Bekkers, 2016) and having a superior make sufficient resources available (cf. Bommert, 2010).

### ***The leadership types***

The main contribution of this study is the strong link we find between the attitude of civil servants towards collaborative innovation and how they experience the level of involvement of their superior in this process. This is in line with private-sector research findings by Deluga (1990) and Rosing et al (2011) that appropriate leadership behaviour is dependent on the individual follower and the specifics of the situation. How this knowledge translates to the public-sector innovation context has not yet been studied. While authors such as Munro (2020) pointed out that attitudes mattered, it was unclear from previous research in what way they mattered.

Intervening leadership is often experienced as frustrating for risk-takers in our study. They want to take charge and when those decisions are taken from them, this affects them. This finding is in line with the research by Fachrunnisa et al (2019) who found that autonomy gives employees a sense of recognition, which has proven to heighten motivation. Yet not all civil servants value autonomy in the same way. Civil servants with a rule-following attitude signal that they need a push from an intervening superior at times in order to take on a project. They also appreciate their superior taking charge and are generally positive about intervening leadership. For collaborators, as explained in the results section, the experience is two-fold. On the one hand,

the lack of autonomy frustrates them; on the other hand, they can use the supervisor's help when it comes to problem-solving and appreciate when their superior is aware of project work and can thus experience and encourage them properly. A brief summary of the civil servants' experiences of intervening leadership organised by attitude can be found in Table 1.

**Table 1: Civil Servants' Experiences of Intervening Leadership**

| <i>CIVIL SERVANTS' EXPERIENCES OF INTERVENING LEADERSHIP</i> |   |
|--|---|
| <i>RISK-TAKERS</i>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General frustration with lack of autonomy</li> </ul>   |
| <i>RULE-FOLLOWERS</i>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Superior taking charge seen as positive</li> <li>• Some frustration with limited autonomy, but initiative from superior needed at times</li> <li>• Subordinate more dependent on superior's evaluation of the project</li> <li>• Hierarchical dynamic allows problems to stay under the radar</li> </ul> |
| <i>COLLABORATORS</i>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General frustration with lack of autonomy</li> <li>• Stronger problem-solving intervention welcomed provided situation not taken out of their hands against their will</li> <li>• Project included in performance assessment of the civil servant seen as positive</li> </ul>                            |

Source: Author

Facilitating leadership suits six out of seven risk-takers in our study best. Autonomy combined with support makes them feel motivated, creative and impactful (cf. Sørensen and Torfing, 2011; De Vries, Bekkers and Tummers, 2016). Yet although autonomy is positively experienced by these respondents, there were some important side notes.

**Table 2: Civil Servants' Experiences of Facilitating Leadership**

| <i>CIVIL SERVANTS' EXPERIENCES OF FACILITATING LEADERSHIP</i> |  |
|---|--|
| <i>RISK-TAKERS</i>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Autonomy seen as positive, increases motivation and creates a feeling of ownership and responsibility over the project</li> <li>• In certain situations that require problem-solving, stronger intervention preferred</li> <li>• Less awareness of subordinates' work in projects makes it hard to evaluate (and praise) it properly</li> </ul>   |
| <i>RULE-FOLLOWERS</i>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Autonomy at times seen as having too many choices → subordinates chose safest options</li> <li>• Subordinates preferred more direction at times</li> </ul>  |
| <i>COLLABORATORS</i>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Autonomy seen as positive, increases motivation and creates a feeling of ownership and responsibility over the project</li> <li>• Problem-solving required stronger intervention → collaborators became more risk-averse after problems arose</li> <li>• Less awareness of subordinates' work in projects makes it hard to evaluate (and praise) properly → created insecurity</li> </ul> |

Source: Author

Civil servants with a collaborator profile who are left free to develop the whole approach to a project, often experience stress in shouldering responsibility for a multitude of decisions, and experience the costs of learning. Meanwhile, all 15 rule-followers in our study prefer to execute instructions, rather than take risks themselves. Not all employees will deliver their full potential if

they are required to devise their own framework. A brief summary of the civil servants' evaluation of facilitating leadership organised by attitude can be found in Table 2.

Although passive leadership was found in our case studies, none of the subordinates preferred it. In general, passive leadership is experienced as having no special advantages. Those who appreciate autonomy (risk-takers) consider facilitating leadership to be the better option, while civil servants with a rule-following attitude appreciate an intervening leader, and collaborators prefer a mix of facilitating and intervening leadership depending on the situation. Hence, our results indicate that leadership is conditional on the attitudes of subordinates; yet also support earlier findings that a lack of leadership - e.g. passive leadership - hampers collaborative innovation (Agger and Sørensen, 2014). A brief summary of the civil servants' evaluation of passive leadership organised by attitude can be found in Table 3.

**Table 3: Civil Servants' Experiences of Passive Leadership**

| <i>CIVIL SERVANTS' EXPERIENCES OF PASSIVE LEADERSHIP</i> |   |
|--|---|
| <i>RISK-TAKERS</i>                                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Autonomy seen as positive, but too much autonomy can lead to making the wrong choices</li> <li>• In problem-solving, stronger intervention preferred</li> <li>• No real performance assessment possible</li> </ul> |
| <i>RULE-FOLLOWERS</i>                                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Total lack of direction or support made subordinates risk-averse</li> </ul>  |
| <i>COLLABORATORS</i>                                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Autonomy without support not seen as real autonomy</li> <li>• Subordinates felt abandoned when problems occurred</li> <li>• No real performance assessment possible → created insecurity</li> </ul>                |

Source: Author

## Conclusion

The main goal of this research was to find out what determines how civil servants experience organisational leadership types in a collaborative innovation context. We aimed to discover under which circumstances subordinates experience a certain leadership style as helping or hampering collaborative innovation. We drew on leadership and collaborative innovation literature to identify civil servants' needs during collaborative innovation projects (cf. Sørensen and Torfing, 2011; Cinar et al, 2019), as well as different types of leadership (cf. Molero, Moriano and Shaver, 2013; Ricard et al, 2017). Through 40 interviews, we first investigated what leadership styles were identified, and then explored the needs of civil servants throughout the phases of collaborative innovation projects. Then, we explored whether or not the way civil servants experience the leadership style of their superiors varied across different phases of collaborative innovation. Contrary to what we expected, the phases only had a limited effect on the (positive or negative) experience of their superior's leadership style. The only link to the innovation cycle found was that when it came to problem-solving and performance assessment (implementation phase), respondents generally appreciated more involvement than in the case of the other phases.

Instead, we found that civil servants' attitudes towards collaborative innovation are decisive in determining how they experience the leadership style of their superior. In addition, we



observed that the range of attitudes civil servants can have towards collaborative innovation are the same as civil servants in a superior position (cf. Lewis et al, 2014). Our findings suggest that a civil servant with a natural inclination to take risks and to innovate is likely best served with a facilitating superior whose interventions in the project are limited, but who is there when required. Providing autonomy and responsibility could allow this type of civil servant to work better in collaborative innovations. Risk-averse civil servants, in contrast, appear to function better with more input from the superior, less autonomy, and stronger and more frequent interventions. For a third type of civil servant, the collaborators, the findings are more nuanced since they seem to benefit from both intervening and facilitating leadership depending on the situation.

Building a typology of civil servants based on their attitudes towards collaborative innovation would be beneficial to enhance further studies on collaborative innovation as well as on leadership. The fact that such a typology is currently lacking represents a gap in the empirical literature especially since authors do hint in theoretical discussions that these civil servant attitudes matter (e.g., Ricard et al, 2017; Munro, 2020). Future research could focus on further developing such a typology since this would allow the leadership needs of civil servants to become more concrete and contextualised, and would greatly increase the accuracy of recommendations for practical implementation.

All interviews were conducted within the same context, that of the Belgian federal government, which may limit the generalisability of the findings. Furthermore, while 40 interviews were conducted yielding a substantial amount of insight, this still provides a modest amount of data and provides (subjective) opinions of only the respondents. The limited cohort of the study and the common context of all cases studied may have influenced our results. Future research, preferably including a larger cohort and more locations are needed. Another challenge in conducting qualitative studies is analysing the data as completely as possible. While a thorough analysis was conducted on which leadership styles could be identified and how the civil servants' experience of these styles were affected by either the innovation process or the civil servants' attitude towards collaborative innovation, it is impossible to uncover all potential explanations of why civil servants may respond differently to the same leadership style. Finally, as our research indicates individual differences in leadership needs, it would be interesting for future research to see if superiors in turn adapt their style from one individual subordinate to another.

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