



# Enabling Teams to Implement Innovative Personalized Activation in a Public Sector Context: Why and How Frontline Leadership Matters

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Scandinavian Journal of  
Public Administration,  
Vol. 27 No. 4 (2023),  
p. 37 – 51

DOI:  
<https://doi.org/10.58235/sjp.a.2023.15007>

**Keywords:**  
integrative frontline  
leadership;  
activation;  
public sector innovation;  
personalisation

## Abstract

This article investigates the strategies used by frontline supervisors to lead teams in the implementation of innovative activation services and the ways in which these strategies are perceived by the frontline workers they lead. Empirical data are collected from team observations and in-depth interviews with frontline supervisors and workers known as employment specialists in a public sector context, i.e., in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV). In this context, a large-scale programme known as Extended Follow-Up was implemented beginning in 2017 with the aim of improving activation services for persons with complex support needs. We identified two leadership strategies: a) a team-focused strategy based on interdependence, in which frontline workers were encouraged to shape and adapt the activation services to each jobseeker, and b) a rule-focused strategy based on constant monitoring of frontline workers to secure their adherence to predefined tools and aims. The former strategy promoted team cohesion and provided the necessary psychological safety to implement the personalized activation service, while the latter strategy limited the frontline workers' creativity and room to manoeuvre. Our findings reveal that integrative leadership approaches that combine autonomy with support present greater prospects for successful innovation implementation in a public sector context.

## Practical Relevance

- The study identifies frontline leaders as crucial in innovation implementation. Office managers can thus leverage this influence by including them in the organization's strategic planning.
- Frontline leaders need resources and allowance to try and fail when new practices are implemented.
- Integrative strategies that combine autonomy and support for employees are important when implementing new practices in public sector organizations.
- Diversity of skills and experience is a crucial ingredient when setting up teams for innovation implementation.

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## Introduction

In response to increasing long-term unemployment, especially among jobseekers with complex support needs, public employment services have adopted innovative strategies and work processes, mainly based on the adoption of personalised forms of activation (Bakkeli 2022a; Gjersøe and Strand 2021; Ingold 2018; Skjold and Lundberg 2022). These personalised strategies seek to tailor employment-seeking to user circumstances and thus call for flexibility, trust-based interactions, and cross-sectoral collaboration (Rice 2017). For frontline workers, the adoption of these new strategies calls for team collaboration and a more externally oriented approach to employers and other service providers in the job market with the aim of finding innovative solutions for jobseekers (Jordan 2018).

In light of this increasing focus on innovative solutions, several studies have highlighted crucial factors associated with the implementation of innovations to succeed in a public sector context (Gebert, Boerner & Lanwehr 2003). Scholars have highlighted the need to rethink personnel, organisational, and leadership competencies to align with the need for stability and experimentation. This has particularly been emphasised as a key role of innovation leadership (Borins 2002; Damanpour 1991; De Vries, Bekkers and Tummers 2016; Kim and Lee 2009; Rainey and Steinbauer 1999; Sørensen and Torfing 2011). Studies of innovation leadership have focused on the coordinating role of top-level managers and political leaders in the enhancement of cross-sectoral collaboration and the promotion of the organisation's strategic vision for innovation (Ansell and Gash 2007; Borins 2002; Demircioglu and Van der Wal 2022; Torfing 2016). Another strand of literature has emphasised the role of frontline employees as key actors in innovation implementation due to their role as 'policy makers' in their day-to-day practice (Bakkeli 2022a, b; Fuglsang 2010).

However, while top managers and frontline workers play a key role in innovation processes, there is increasing recognition that frontline supervisors, that is, supervisors who occupy a direct position above frontline workers, may be the decisive factor in the success or failure of innovations during the implementation stage (Thøgersen 2021).

Despite this recognition, there is little research, especially in the field of activation, on what frontline supervisors actually *do* when leading teams that are expected to implement innovative practices, or on the consequences of their activities (notable exceptions in this context include Bakkeli 2022b; Westrup and Danielsson 2019). This situation highlights the existing research gap regarding the agency of frontline leaders and the ways in which the relations between leader and team members may impact implementation processes (Thøgersen 2021; Tummers and Knies 2013). Our study aims to fill this gap by exploring the impact of frontline public sector leadership on groups and organisations 'in an age when change skills, vision articulation and innovation are in demand,' (Orazi, Turrini and Valotti 2013; Van Wart 2003, 225).

Thus, based on data collected through fieldwork and personal interviews with frontline supervisors and employment specialists working in three Norwegian Welfare Administration (NAV) offices, and drawing on theoretical approaches that conceptualise leadership as diversity-sensitive, participatory, interdependent, and contingent (Edmondson 2003, Gebert, Boerner and Lanwehr 2003; Torfing 2016), we address the following research question: What strategies do frontline supervisors use to lead teams in the implementation of personalized activation services, and how are these strategies experienced by the frontline workers in their teams? We adopt Sørensen and Torfing (2011, 8)'s definition of innovation as an "intentional and proactive process that involves the generation, practical adoption and spread of new and creative ideas, which aim to produce a qualitative value in a specific context." This definition is important for public sector innovation because it captures important elements in the innovation process and distinguishes innovation from a mere idea or invention. In this case, innovation is context-specific, involves a qualitative transformation in underlying problem understanding, and addresses the issues of implementation and diffusion (Sørensen and Torfing 2011, 850). In this way, focussing on frontline innovation leadership in the public sector emphasizes the context-specific nature of innovation.

In the following section, we discuss the theoretical synthesis that informs our approach to frontline innovation leadership, followed by a description of the study context and methodology.

Our analysis is informed by an inductive approach, in which themes are developed from the data (Braun and Clarke 2019) to reflect the most significant approaches and experiences as elaborated by our participants. The paper then concludes with a discussion of the findings, linking them to our theoretical understandings.

## Theoretical Framework

### Innovation leadership in frontline service implementation

This study focuses on frontline innovation leadership in a public sector frontline service organisation, which refers to an organisation that has face-to-face interactions with users. Innovations in the public sector aim to improve work processes for personnel or to create new and better services for users (De Vries, Bekkers and Tummers 2016). To achieve these goals, new ways of doing things must be communicated, integrated, and translated, thus allowing them to be incorporated into the daily routines of organisation members (Thøgersen 2021). Given the high degree of autonomy with which frontline professionals in public sector organisations are provided by their managers (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000), the debate in the literature pertains to how public leaders can adapt and influence their behaviour when the aim is to implement innovative processes (Behn 1991).

Scholars have argued for the facilitating role of leaders, which offers followers the autonomy and opportunity necessary to experiment within their areas of responsibility while also balancing the need for stability (Jacobsen 2018; Torfing 2016). Damanpour (1991) for example, emphasises that managerial support is required during the implementation stage, when coordination and conflict resolution among individuals and units are essential (558). Indeed, leaders may need to experiment with various strategies to encourage employees to participate in innovative activities, as these strategies may have different effects on employees' innovative behaviours.

Two strands of literature are notable in this regard; the transactional leadership literature, which focusses on leaders' approach to the task of influencing followers by appealing to follower's self-interest, and transformational leadership literature, which focusses on the motivating and trust-building role of frontline leaders (Van Wart 2003; Vigoda-Gadot and Beerli 2012).

Although scholars seem to agree that transformational forms of leadership that encourage autonomy and promote vision are better suited to the task of promoting a sound innovation process, critics contend that in the context of public organisations, autonomy can present challenges if it is not supported by integrative strategies (Gebert, Boerner and Lanwehr 2003). These challenges may be related to conflict, inadequate coordination, and low-quality innovations. Hence, Gebert, Boerner and Lanwehr (2003) recommend that to counteract autonomy-generated negative effects in innovation processes, leaders must support autonomy with integrative approaches such as clear communication of organisational goals, trust building, and consensus building.

Torfing (2016) argues for the potential of leadership beyond transactional and transformational forms, noting that public sector innovation leadership must be both adaptive and pragmatic. The goal of this approach is to align people, processes, and goals by integrating new activities into old ones, thus promoting the capacity for single and double loop learning. Emphasizing the role of public sector leaders, Orazi, Turrini and Valotti (2013, 287) also claim that the optimal role of leadership is an integrated one, 'moderately leveraging transactional relationships with their followers, while heavily leveraging the transformational aspects of trust and integrity in the performance of tasks'. Thøgersen (2021) makes a related argument, noting that in public service organisations, frontline leaders provide a clear vision and balance employees' freedom to experiment with the need to focus on the organisation's main goals. Such a conception of leadership closely resembles what Behn (1991) describes as a simultaneous loose-tight relationship between leaders and followers, which enables workers to be innovative while maintaining a tight focus on the overall mission of the organisation.

In the case of top down-initiated innovations that require teamwork, such as Extended Follow-Up, several studies have shown that implementation is facilitated by horizontal

leadership, which focusses on building trust, encouraging problem questioning, and empowering followers. This approach increases the feasibility of desired changes (Amble, Amundsen and Rismark 2020; Dyer, Dyer and Dyer 2013; Edmondson 2003; Gebert, Boerner and Lanwehr 2003; O'Donovan et al. 2021; Wright and Pandey 2010). Simultaneously, contingency is emphasised, as the environment in which innovations occur can enable or constrain leadership practices (Andreasson and Lundqvist 2018; Damanpour 1991). In Nordic countries, for example, Andreasson and Lundqvist (2018) show that although a flat leadership structure in organisations can be conducive to innovation, at its worst, it can be viewed as an abdication of leadership, especially in situations in which lower-level managers view decisions as handed down from above and focus on administration.

In summary, the literature on public sector innovation implementation highlights the importance of leaders who promote flexibility and experimentation while simultaneously being cognizant of the need for stability. The literature emphasises the context-specific nature of leadership practice and reveals how context can both constrain and enable innovation. These insights will be useful in our discussion of the strategies on which the frontline supervisors in our study rely to lead teams in the implementation of innovation in activation.

### **Context: Extended follow-up**

In Norway, since 2017, the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV) has been mandated by the government to implement a personalized activation programme known as Extended Follow-Up. Personalized here refers to “tailored services that account for individual client needs” Fuertes and Lindsay (2016, 526). In this programme, teams of frontline workers called “employment specialists” are hired by local NAV offices.

Employment specialists are tasked with adopting the European Union Supported Employment (EUSE) framework to tailor services to the needs of each jobseeker. Supported employment (SE) is operationalized through a five-step process: establishing contact with jobseekers, mapping their skills and interests, identifying suitable employers and workplaces, cooperating with employers to establish work relationships, and providing continual skills and social support at work to ensure a long-term employment relationship (EUSE 2010). While employment specialists must follow these steps in their daily work, the overall annual goal is to assist at least 65% of the jobseekers in their portfolio into paid work (NAV 2020). In local NAV offices, employment specialists are organized into teams led by frontline supervisors strategically positioned between top management and employees. These frontline supervisors are responsible for daily follow up with employment specialists to ensure that personalized labour (re)integration is effectively implemented. Extended Follow-Up emphasizes team collaboration, lower caseloads, close collaboration with employers, and clear frontline worker accountability. It thus represents a distinct way of providing activation services through NAV, an organisation that has long been described as having a hierarchical structure, strictly relying on rules, and exerting control over frontline workers’ daily work life (Bakkeli 2022a). NAV, as a public sector organisation, is subject to political control and public funding (Nørgaard 2022). This situation means that both frontline supervisors and employment specialists must be sensitive to their organisational environment while simultaneously engaging in innovative activities that may require flexibility and nonconventional approaches. Thus, the strategies used by these teams under these circumstances offer an interesting research arena.

## **Materials and Methods**

### **Study design, participants and data collection**

The study consisted of team observations and 18 in-depth interviews with employment specialists and frontline supervisors at three NAV offices implementing Extended Follow-Up. Of these, 14 were employment specialists and 4 were frontline supervisors. Offices in which Extended Follow-Up was established for more than three years were selected to capture the experiences of an established practice. The chosen cases therefore serve as “useful examples” (Bakkeli 2022a, 5) to illustrate interactions between frontline supervisors and frontline workers while implementing a new practice within a public sector context. In one of the offices, the

supervisory team consisted of two people, with one of the supervisors having formal power as the department head and the other managing the daily SE implementation. In the other two offices, these roles were held by a single person. Table 1 shows the team descriptive characteristics.

*Table 1. Descriptive team characteristics*

	Team 1	Team 2	Team 3
No. of employment specialists	5	10	5
Formal leadership structure	Integrated: Supervisor is personnel manager	Divided: 2 supervisors, one with formal powers	Integrated
Education	Social work, public administration	Social work, psychology, administration, health	Pedagogy, business, engineering
No. of interviews	5 (1 supervisor)	8 (2 supervisors)	5 (1 supervisor)

The first author carried out observations and in-depth interviews between January and May 2021. She took part in weekly and daily digital team meetings over four weeks in each office (twelve weeks in total). These meetings were part of an established routine at the study sites and were not established for the research purposes. She also participated in a two-day workshop at one of the offices in which new quality guidelines were discussed regarding NAV's SE implementation in Extended Follow-Up. During the observations, the researcher noted the team leadership practices, SE approaches, and discussions regarding the challenges and solutions for personalized service provision. The researcher used these meetings to recruit participants for interviews.

Observation was used to capture empirical encounters between workers and their leaders, during which information was processed, impressions were built, and decisions were made as "a place of experience-based learning about one another" (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2022).

All participants were given information about the study in advance, and they gave both verbal and written consent to be interviewed. The interviews were carried out via the internet (Microsoft Teams/Zoom) due to COVID-19 restrictions and the home office requirements instituted by NAV. They lasted between 45 minutes and 2.15 hrs, and all were recorded and transcribed verbatim in Norwegian. All transcripts were securely stored in password-protected files. We obtained formal ethical permission to undertake this study from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (Project No. 279532).

The interview guide for the frontline supervisors covered themes such as (i) team composition, (ii) team organization and supervision, (iii) approaches to the performance/scorecard regime, (iv) the main challenges in implementing Extended Follow-Up, and (v) ideas for improvement. The interview guide for the employment specialists focused on their daily activities, their views on team leadership, the main challenges, opportunities in implementing Extended Follow-Up, and job satisfaction. To protect the participants' identities, general titles and identifying numbers, such as "Employment Specialist 1, Team 2," were used in the transcripts. To assure anonymity and enhance the readability of this article, we refer to all our participants as *she/her*.

## Data analysis

When analysing the data, we followed Eggebø's (2020) approach of collective data analysis. This process involved presenting an abstract for each interview, mapping the data and sorting out the main themes. Furthermore, the interview transcripts and field notes were thematically analysed (Braun and Clarke 2019), individually by each author and later collectively in a two-day workshop in which all the interviews were presented, and the main themes and subthemes were developed. During this workshop, the preliminary research questions were identified before a more focused round of analysis enabled us to develop and describe the two leadership

strategies: a) team-focused and b) rule-focused. Braun and Clarke (2019), note that themes and subthemes capture something important in relation to the overall research question and represent some level of patterned meaning within a dataset. Thus, regarding the team-focused strategy, we identified subthemes such as “hiring the right people,” “creating team coherence,” “creating action space through alliances,” “focusing on shared goals,” and “constantly engaging in dialogue and support.” With respect to the rule-focused leadership strategy, we identified subthemes such as “recruiting likeminded colleagues,” “enforcing compliance,” and “strictly adhering to ‘the method.’” In the results section, we present our findings through these themes and subthemes, emphasizing the differences between these two leadership approaches. We emphasise, in line with Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2000), that story-based findings are textual embodiments of our respondents’ experiences that enliven their routines and deviations. They allow the simultaneous expression of multiple perspectives and give the research pungency and vitality because they foreground individual actions and practices.

## Results

In all three teams, the frontline supervisors and employment specialists regarded leadership as crucial for implementing personalized activation services. However, they enacted different leadership strategies. While one team focused on “having the right people in the team and taking care of them,” the other teams in our study viewed the path to successful personalized activation in terms of “following rules and the method,” referring to SE and NAV’s reporting requirements. These two approaches are elaborated below.

### Team-focused leadership strategy

#### *Hiring the right people*

As mentioned earlier, implementing new practices in the public sector may require organisational changes. Such changes may include new personnel and a new work culture (Bakkeli 2022b; Birken, Lee and Weiner 2012). The frontline supervisor who adopted a team-focused strategy recognized the importance of recruiting the “right” people and building a work culture that was different from the usual way of doing things in NAV. This supervisor emphasized that, when recruiting her team, she sought people with different educational backgrounds, networks and extensive work experience in various sectors and industries. She explained her reasoning as follows:

... we were thinking a little differently [than many others in NAV] when we were hiring people. We hired people who had never worked in NAV; I was even new to NAV myself! Suddenly, people were asking, “What is [a technical field] doing in NAV?” I was not looking for social workers or people who had worked in the system for a hundred years because we wanted to do something new, and it is hard to do something new when you have been in the system for so long.

According to her, it was essential to recruit team members who were willing to perform tasks in new ways and who had labour market knowledge and thus an understanding of the employer’s perspective regarding work inclusion. This team diversity was also regarded by the employment specialists as the strength of the team. One participant noted the following:

We come from different backgrounds. If I have a person who needs a job in health, I have no knowledge of health, but my colleague does. Then, I can also help them next time they have someone who wants something from the technical field ... You always learn a lot from colleagues because we all have done different things in life.

Another employment specialist observed the following:

I think we work well together because we are a [team with a] good mix of both age and experience. In other offices where there are many young people, the pressure can be too much in this job, and many quit because they do not have long experience with work life, but we stick together because we understand the challenges attached to this job.

Thus, the employment specialists emphasized that having different skills, experiences and networks in the teams was important for finding opportunities for the jobseekers.

### *Creating team coherence*

The supervisor adopting a team-focused strategy built team coherence by setting the stage early on. She recalled the following experience:

When we started out, we had a three-day retreat where we sat down and discussed, like “who are we, what do we want to be known for?” And even though we are all different, we found out that we have a lot in common. We came back energized and started from there...

Afterwards, she gave the employment specialists the freedom to develop ideas to solve individual cases, thus taking ownership and using the most suitable tools. She noted the following:

I treat my people as project managers; each has a portfolio they are responsible for, and they can decide how to engage each case because I trust their judgement...

However, unlike the two other offices, this supervisor emphasized that the responsibility for results should not be placed on each individual team member alone. Rather, she emphasized that the results should be measured at the team level. This insistence was because, as the supervisor explained, when the jobseekers were distributed among the team members, it was a “pure lottery” whether an employment specialist would succeed in finding the right paid job and, if successful, how long this process would take. Thus, the supervisor concluded, “I have been clear from the start that it is the team that delivers the results.” This combination of (a) trust at the individual level and (b) team-level result management created team coherence and strengthened team spirit while reducing individual job pressures.

### *Focusing on shared goals*

Nationally, personalized activation in Extended Follow-Up is governed according to certain parameters, e.g., employment specialist portfolio size (12-20), new employee contacts per week (5), time spent out of the office each week (40%), and the annual percentage of jobseekers who obtain a long-term paid job (65%) (NAV, 2020). For the supervisor adopting a team-focused strategy, the parameters relating to portfolio size, new employee contacts and out-of-office time were considered guidelines to be followed with discretion and achieved at the team level in the long term (if at all). She noted the following:

For me, “quality of service” is not about a top score on the measurement scale. For example, I have a person on the team who always has little out-of-office time, but this person has contacts and fixes issues on the telephone, and we get a lot out of them. When you start expecting all these results individually, it’s no wonder people quit, because, personally, I wouldn’t want my boss to tell me every month that I haven’t done my job just because I haven’t met all these parameters.

She explained that she did not push people out of the office “just to please the system.” Rather, she argued, “we must use our time efficiently and consider the bigger picture,” i.e., focus on the overall goal, which was to provide their candidates with viable and lasting employment. Thus, the performance measures did not result in competition. Moreover, the supervisor did not expect the employment specialists to follow the SE methodology uniformly. Rather, the priorities were collaboration, sharing ideas and networks, and supporting each other while having fun together. Hence, the leader said the following:

We do creative things, like “[a board game],” where for example, if the candidate doesn’t turn up when you’ve scheduled a meeting, you fall. If you get good feedback, you move ahead, etc.

This approach to accomplishing parameters through focussing on shared goals and each member’s strengths created an atmosphere in which the employment specialists were keen to support each other. In addition, the supervisor was regarded as shielding them from unnecessary micromanagement by focussing on the big picture.

### *Creating action space and alliances*

The frontline supervisors emphasized the importance of working as allies with the employment specialists, counsellors, and office managers. The supervisor adopting a team-focused strategy emphasized the importance of supporting her employment specialists vis à vis other staff members in the organization who did not necessarily know much about SE or what it meant to work as an employment specialist. She noted that, after she took the time to explain some of the

challenges related to succeeding in finding the right job to the jobseekers, internal collaboration challenges ceased.

Equally important was creating allies with the top office management. The supervisor with the double role (formal personnel and professional responsibility) had obtained a “seat at the table” in the NAV hierarchy. Contrasting her position with offices in which the formal department head and the supervisor role were separate, she noted the following:

I think it can be more difficult in teams where these roles are divided. The integrated role of the head of department and supervisor should be the solution for all teams. It is an advantage. (...) Having formal power makes the job easier ... Also, as the head of department, I have direct access to the regional director and the management team. They listen to me, and if there are any issues in my team, I can directly ask for help ...

She noted that because of this good relationship with the top management, she had, for instance, secured funding for an extra person to join the team. In addition, she was perceived by the employment specialists as “a mother hen that spreads her wings to protect [the team] from the rain.”

Additionally, several of the employment specialists noted that they sometimes received directives from upper management that they considered unhelpful. However, in such cases, their supervisor helped them address the challenge. An employment specialist expressed this situation as follows:

For us, the greatest challenge is these directives that come from above. We don't see them as productive for our work ... So, if we had a leader who just nodded and wanted us to follow these directives blindly, such as “now you must be out” or “now you have to have so-and-so many employer contacts,” we would not have managed to stay in the job for long because it is almost impossible to satisfy those parameters. So, for us, the reason we enjoy our job is that we look at these directives, choose what works for us, and, swish, put the others aside and do our job.

Another noted that “we have a leader who is not a ‘yes-person’ vis à vis the top management; that is why we enjoy our work”. In addition, yet another one expressed that “our leader is very competent; like a parent to us, she fights for us so that we can do our best as a team.” Thus, the employment specialists explained that an important reason they appreciated their work so much was that they felt embraced and understood by their supervisor who defended them against any “system-generated harm” such as constant accountability measures from above. Notably, although under this strategy, the employment specialists did not strictly adhere to NAV's parameters, they reported quite satisfying overall results. According to the supervisor, more than 65% of the candidates had obtained viable paid jobs in the year before the study (the official goal set by the Directorate). Furthermore, even during a year with COVID-19 restrictions, at the time of the interview, they had a 61% transition rate to paid work.

### *Constantly engaging in dialogue and support*

Many of the employment specialists described their job as a rollercoaster involving ups and downs. In this work situation, support from the team members and the supervisor was very much needed. In addition, establishing routines for continual communication was important for making daily case decisions. To do so, the supervisor adopting a team-focused strategy said that daily morning meetings were used to update everyone on the plans and needs and to establish the course for the rest of the day. In these meetings, the employment specialists felt safe enough to be vulnerable about their frustrations and needs. Additionally, they shared tips on how to solve challenges, which contributed to strengthening the feeling of togetherness and of being supported by their supervisors and colleagues, especially when they worked from home during the COVID-19 pandemic. The supervisor explained that because of this ongoing supportive dialogue, the people on her team could openly disagree but still worked quite well together. Indeed, an employment specialist noted, “I am sure you have seen in our meetings; everyone has an opinion, and no one gets upset if their idea is voted down. You just move on.” This practice of disagreeing without being disagreeable encouraged the employment specialists to work through problems and build strong team bonds.

To summarize, even at the recruitment stage, the supervisor consciously focused on building a well-functioning team with members of different ages, educational levels, work experiences

and professional networks. Early on, moreover, individual success was established as team success and individual failure was considered a common responsibility. Importantly, results in terms of out-of-office time, employer contacts and transitions to work were measured at the team rather than the individual level. These parameters were set because the team facilitator perceived individual measures to be highly problematic, not least because the candidate type each employment specialist received was random: Some jobseekers were easy to place; others were not. Furthermore, the team-focused leadership strategy emphasized agreement on common goals, flexibility, daily evaluations in morning meetings to address crises, and a proactive and problem-solving approach to the challenges involved in implementing personalized practices. In addition, the supervisor emphasized the need for everybody's voice to be heard through team dialogue and reflection. These factors created a dynamic leadership style that fostered an environment of trust and psychological safety, allowing team members to collaborate in pursuit of job opportunities for the jobseekers.

### **Rule-focused leadership strategy**

#### *Recruiting likeminded colleagues*

The supervisors from the two other offices had been recruited to existing teams. The supervisory team in the office in which the department head and the supervisor roles were occupied by two people shared that, at the time of the interview, they struggled to develop stable relationships with some of the employment specialists on the team. Thus, when they recruited new people, their focus was on avoiding conflict rather than on creating diversity. One supervisor stated the problem as follows:

It is extremely important that I have a say in recruitment. One thing is professional, but it depends a lot on team composition. It has been important for me because if I am to put together a team that works quite well, I must get the right people to build it. If someone comes along who has been in many disputes, it will be challenging.

This supervisor had experienced her own position being questioned by members of the team who regarded her as unqualified since she lacked practical SE experience. She described how leading her team was “demanding”:

When a new supervisor was to be recruited, we had some problems ... Because there was a person [in the employment specialist team] who was already intended for that role, and that person was not me. So it was a long process to communicate that “this is my team” and that “I lead this team now” ... It has been a heavy process.

Her situation, however, was made even more difficult by the fact that she has no formal power because her office practices the divided supervisor model. Thus, she said the following about her role as a supervisor:

It is extremely difficult to be in this role because you often get close to the team members, and they tell you about things they find difficult ... But then my role is only supposed to deal with issues related to the method ...

Later, she concluded, “So it is difficult to be a leader without power.” However, her colleague, the department head who had formal power, seemed to approach leadership from a distance and to be primarily concerned with personnel management issues. She relied on the supervisor to oversee the “daily operations of the team.” As the department head said:

As a leader, I have trust in the people I lead. I have no need to know what they do daily. I do not follow up every employment specialist. That’s the job of the other supervisor.

Later in the interview, however, she stated the converse: She wanted to be closer to the employment specialists. This was because being their leader was “complicated” when she did not know much about either SE or the employment specialists’ everyday tasks and challenges.

In this office, although the employment specialists expressed that they tried to collaborate, a general feeling expressed by some of our participants was that if a worker could not place enough people in long-term work, “this is my fault and mine alone.” In addition, team fragmentation seems to have resulted from the supervisory teams’ failure to communicate its vision to the team. As a result, after a year of leading the team, the supervisors were still unsure of their standing vis à vis the team.

*Strictly adhering to “the method”*

Supervisors in two offices emphasized the formal procedures as stipulated in the national Extended Follow-Up guidelines. These supervisors argued that “the method,” referring to the five-step SE model, works and that if the employment specialists followed this method, they would produce results. Thus, adopting a rule-focused strategy, the supervisors sought to adhere strictly to the EUSE standards and the accompanying reporting requirements established by the Directorate of Labour. A supervisor insisted that “being true to the method” was the only route to success. She said, “I’ve always believed that as long as we are true to the method, the results will come.” Thus, all employment specialists were expected to fulfil the requirements related to making a certain number of new employee contacts, spending a certain amount of time out of the office and reporting on these parameters individually every week.

However, this process was not accomplished without protest. The employment specialists felt that measuring the results at the individual level made them personally responsible for negative results. An employment specialist observed the following:

We all have those periods where it seems like a long time since you got someone into paid work. Things go slowly, you have some challenging cases, and you feel that “this is all just my fault!”

Another voiced frustration regarding the need to follow the method without exception:

My experience is that we are very much managed; there is little room for critical thinking [in this team]. Everything that comes from the top is “hallelujah.” The tools have become more important than the results. When they say they want quality of service, and then they insist on this micromanagement and all the counting, they just mean quantity. Our job thrives on building relations, but when you have so much control and so little trust, you lose motivation. ... It’s no wonder there is high turnover among employment specialists; this micromanagement takes away all the joy from our work.

Such frustrations were also prevalent in the weekly meetings, during which many employment specialists complained about “sleeping” candidates and “difficult cases” while apologizing for not having many employee contacts to report due to COVID-19 restrictions.

*Enforcing compliance*

The department head adopting a rule-centred strategy said that her arm’s length approach was based on “trust in [her] people.” However, she was also quick to note that an extensive chain of command limited how team supervisors could influence important decisions in NAV. The supervisor explained that top management at the local office heavily emphasized reporting results. She also stated that amid the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, she sometimes “sat” on the results and avoided reporting them because they were deficient. She further complained that the greatest challenge with leading the employment specialists was that they were too “autonomous.”

It is a challenging department to lead because there are very many creative people and very many who think they know the right method. It is demanding to lead them because it means that when maybe 15 people have different opinions about how to solve a problem, I must decide, and that means that not everyone gets what they wished for.

This discord was echoed in interviews with the employment specialists led by this supervisory team, who insisted that the department head should stop interfering with their work and focus on personnel issues. An employment specialist put it thus:

The head of the department is only supposed to stick to human resource issues. We have given a clear message that she should not discuss the subject of SE with us.

In response, the supervisory team’s approach in the observed team meetings was to suppress points of conflict. In addition, the team asserted that some issues had already been decided by upper management and the employment specialists needed to comply.

Another supervisor emphasized the importance of working “within the boundaries set by NAV”:

We can say all we want about being flexible, but we must remember that this is NAV; it is a politically managed organisation. The politicians want to see the numbers, so in as much as we say we have freedom, it’s the numbers that determine whether we are prioritized. So, I am always clear

when I recruit people, that in this job, there is a lot of reporting on many parameters to make sure that it is understood.

However, the employment specialists saw these attempts by the supervisors to force them to follow routines as a “burden” on their work. One employment specialist said, for instance, that it was challenging to have leaders “who do not trust us and who try to challenge what kind of framework we need to carry out our everyday work.” Another added that their leaders sometimes made decisions that did not “help to make our work easier, but that make our job more difficult. For me, this steals a lot of energy and takes a lot of unnecessary time.”

Nonetheless, communicating challenges to top management was difficult because, according to the supervisory team in which the roles were divided, the extensive chain of command in the office entailed that even the department head did not have much authority over local office decisions. One supervisor illustrated this situation as follows:

It is not easy to influence the big decisions. I have, for example, worked here for three years, but the top manager of this office did not know who I was when we attended the same meetings. Even my head of department has a leader above her, who also has another leader. So, we must use what we get from above.

This lack of a seat at the management table of the local NAV office was revealed during the researcher-observed team meetings. The employment specialists were allocated fewer workspaces at the office by local office management, who argued that since their job required them to spend most of their time outside of the office, they did not need much office space. In two of the four observed team meetings, the employment specialists tried to discuss this issue with the team supervisors. On both occasions, however, rather than listening to the hurt feelings of the employment specialists in this regard, the supervisors responded that this concern had already been decided by office management, and the team had to move on to other issues.

In the interviews, the supervisors explained that the employment specialists did not seem to grasp that they needed to work “*within* the boundaries of the NAV.” Thus, they described their most important task as integrating the employment specialist team with NAV, rather than, for instance, trying to foster closer collaboration with employers to create optimal job matches for jobseekers.

In summary, under a rule-focused leadership strategy, the supervisor–employment specialist relations were characterized by mistrust. The supervisors despaired that their employment specialists wanted “too much independence” and tried to compel them to fall in line with little success. The employment specialists, on the other hand, argued that their greatest barrier to doing a good job was how leadership was enacted. In addition, the supervisors in these two teams were strongly loyal to upper management, and decisions regarding the employment specialists’ welfare were rarely open for discussion. This inability to manage conflict and build trust generated indignation among the teams, which perceived that its leaders were more concerned with protecting the system than they were with making the work easier.

### **Contextualising our findings-possible explanations for the two approaches**

Van Wart (2003, 221) makes an important point when he argues that ‘leaders do not act in a vacuum, they are part of the flow of history and set in a culture filled with crises, opportunities and dumb luck’. It may thus be incorrect to argue that leaders in our study ‘chose’ one strategy over the other. Although this claim is largely true of the team-focused strategy, where both supervisors and team members actively sought to shape how the team would function, the rule-focused strategy was enabled by factors that were largely embedded in the environment in which the teams operated.

The frontline supervisors in the rule-focused teams had been recruited to existing teams, with established cultures that they needed to navigate before they could make their own impact on the teams. In one team, the first task encountered difficulties from the beginning. Simultaneously, office management was multi-layered and inaccessible to these supervisors; nonetheless, there was a constant demand for results. As such, the frontline supervisors had no support system to which they could turn when their relations with team members hit rock bottom. On the other hand, in the team-focused setting, the frontline leader had easy access to

office management and had been offered sufficient room to innovate. This situation made her job less demanding in terms of navigating organisational barriers.

Additionally, the team strategies can partly be ascribed to the socialisation of frontline supervisors. Whereas the leader employing the team-focused strategy was an outsider, and therefore had no existing loyalties to 'how things are done here' the other leaders were long-serving cadres who had internalised the organisation's way of doing things. In both teams that employed the rule-focused strategy, the leaders can also be said to have relied naively on the Nordic model (Andreasson and Lundqvist 2018) of leadership allowing autonomy without a support system and following rules in the hope that their task was merely administrative.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The study explored the strategies that frontline supervisors adopt when leading teams in implementing personalized activation services and how these strategies were experienced by frontline workers in three frontline welfare service offices in Norway. Based on observations and in-depth interviews with frontline supervisors and their teams, we identified two main strategies: team-focused, which involved relationship-building and increased participation of frontline workers in determining how personalisation was implemented, and rule-focused, which was based on strict adherence to standardized tools and constant monitoring of frontline workers' use of these tools.

The team-focused strategy exhibits strong elements of transformative leadership (Orazi, Turrini and Valotti 2013), where the leader acts as a coach and visionary, offering team members the liberty and autonomy necessary to find solutions for jobseekers. This approach worked for this team because the negative side effects of autonomy (Gebert, Boerner and Lanwehr 2003) were mitigated by focussing on the needs of team members, consensus building, and developing trust. This created an environment of psychological safety for employment specialists that resulted in 'positive-sum games' (Gebert, Boerner and Lanwehr 2003, 45) in pursuit of job opportunities for jobseekers. Essentially, in line with the recommendations of Orazi, Turrini and Valotti (2013), we can argue based on our results that this team succeeded by maximising the positive aspects of transformational leadership while carefully leveraging a few aspects of transactional leadership.

On the other hand, teams in which a rule-focused strategy was prevalent, the team members' demands for autonomy within an environment of mistrust led to escalation of conflict. These negative effects of autonomy have been documented in the literature (Gebert, Boerner and Lanwehr 2003). The situational control that employment specialists in rule focused teams demanded was not supported by integrative strategies. As a result, some supervisors abdicated their leadership duties and said, "I trust you to do what you should"; "It's hard to learn when you already know" argues Edmondson (2003). The frontline supervisors who used this strategy thought the employment specialists knew what they needed to do because requirements had to be met; nevertheless, the strategy seemed to work against learning. Thus, failure was explained in terms of the wrong people, wrong employment, etc., i.e., situations over which the employment specialists had no control. Thus, many employment specialists experienced a rule-focused strategy as disempowering and as depriving them of the trust they needed to build relations with both jobseekers and employers.

How may we interpret these results in relation to leadership of innovation at the frontline of public sector organisations?

Innovation leadership in the public sector is concerned with the notion of balance between stability and experimentation (Damanpour 1991; Jacobsen 2018; Sørensen and Torfing 2011). Our results reveal how frontline supervisors approached this task and highlight the consequences of such an approach. Based on the team-focused strategy, frontline supervisors analysed organisational goals, rejecting cumbersome micro-practices, while at the same time being cognisant of the requirements to report on the most important indicators. This proactive role allowed the team to take control of their destiny and innovate without necessarily coming into conflict with the need for organisational stability. As such, the ability to interpret the team vision and communicate it with the team and other members of the organisation made it possible for

the team to engage in innovative activities. Our findings are in line with the literature on frontline leadership and innovation implementation (Bakkeli 2022b; Cinar, Trott and Simms 2019, 271; Edmondson 2003; Thøgersen 2021), which has demonstrated that because of their position directly above frontline staff in the organisational hierarchy, frontline supervisors facilitate innovation processes by establishing a culture supportive of innovation activities, removing administrative barriers, and lobbying for resources during implementation processes.

Regarding the contingent nature of innovation leadership, our study also contains interesting insights. One such insight pertains to how to balance the demand for the autonomy and support that is necessary for innovation with the laid-back and sometimes overly delegative frontline leadership that is typical of many Nordic public organisations. As in some of our cases, frontline leaders took rules for granted, transferring management demands directly to frontline workers in the hope that if these rules are followed, implementation will proceed smoothly. As our study shows, this approach in fact affects implementation negatively. Nordic leaders may therefore have to be more proactive in their approach to leading at the frontline by applying the ‘loose-tight’ (Behn 1991) approach to facilitate creativity while simultaneously providing clear direction for innovation implementation. In summary, even under conditions of low power distance and autonomy, proactive frontline leadership continues to be relevant to the success of innovation implementation. Given their importance in innovation implementation, future research could explore how organisations may best leverage frontline supervisors’ position when implementing innovations in the public sector.

## Funding

This research is part of the doctoral research of the first author and is financed through her position at the Western University College of Applied Sciences in Norway.

## Ethics

This research is done according to the NESH guidelines. The research has obtained approval from the Norwegian Centre for research data, number 279532.

## Conflict of interest

We have no conflicts of interest to report.

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