



# THE NEW PUBLIC-SECTOR LEADER

By Christopher Daniel, Steve Remedios, and Daniele Pigni

**A**S GOVERNMENTS WORLDWIDE DEAL with the powerful forces transforming society, it has never been more important to consider what constitutes effective public-sector leadership and how to equip leaders with the needed skills.

In our work with clients, we have seen that public entities are most effective when they are headed by leaders who can navigate complex, highly visible positions while prioritizing long-term initiatives over short-term politics. These leaders are grounded in the ethical imperatives and public accountability that are integral to their positions. They motivate people and sustain performance without the benefit of measures widely used in the private sector.

To produce such leaders, the public sector must make leader development a key pillar of its overall strategy for the future. To that end, BCG has created a three-part framework that can help government agencies coach individuals in three areas: personal skills, network leadership, and impact on society.

## The Public Sector's Unique Challenges

In addition to dealing with many of the same problems encountered by their private-sector counterparts, public-sector leaders must cope with circumstances that are unique to public entities. These include:

- **Complex Ecosystems.** The public sector practically invented bureaucracy. Leaders who run public entities must provide essential services while juggling politics, projects that are often national in scope, and relationships with other agencies and the private sector. If they cannot cut through this complexity, they cannot be effective. They may lose power, see initiatives slow down or die, and have potential alliances fall apart.
- **Long-Term Goals.** In industry, companies introduce new products or services all the time. Public-sector leaders oversee mandates and public projects that can take years to complete, with benefits that may not be apparent right away or even in the near term. Focusing

too much on short-term issues or immediate political demands can impede progress toward long-term goals.

- **High-Profile Public Personas.** Public servants live in the spotlight, their activities scrutinized by constituents, media, and rival political parties. What they say or do reflects not just on them but on the country or agency that they represent. Any communications misstep can expose them to criticism from the public and to legal action by adversaries, to the point of having to leave their post.
- **Ethical Responsibilities.** The decisions that public-sector leaders make can affect an entire country. Because the potential impacts and risks are so great, leaders must continually consider the ethical outcomes of their decisions on their constituencies. If they are tempted to cut corners or use their standing for personal gain, they risk damaging not only their own reputation and that of the entity they represent, but the reputation of the entire country.
- **Ill-Defined Accountabilities.** Public-sector projects can be massive and complex. Getting things done requires teamwork and cooperation across multiple entities. In such circumstances, an individual's responsibilities can be unclear and the consequences of his or her actions diluted. If leaders feel that they lack authority, they may not be willing or able to inspire and lead their teams. And if they cannot inspire people to follow through, they will not be able to bring projects to the finish line.

## The BCG Public-Sector Leadership Framework

BCG's client work shows that successful public-sector organizations have leaders who thrive despite trying circumstances because they are articulate, active, and capable. Our public-sector framework is based on three broad characteristics that these

individuals have in common: they are transparent leaders, they lead the network, and they have an impact on the country. (See the exhibit.)

### BE A TRANSPARENT LEADER

Public-sector leaders lead for all and must adopt an open style of operating and communicating that can withstand public scrutiny. To that end, they must do the following:

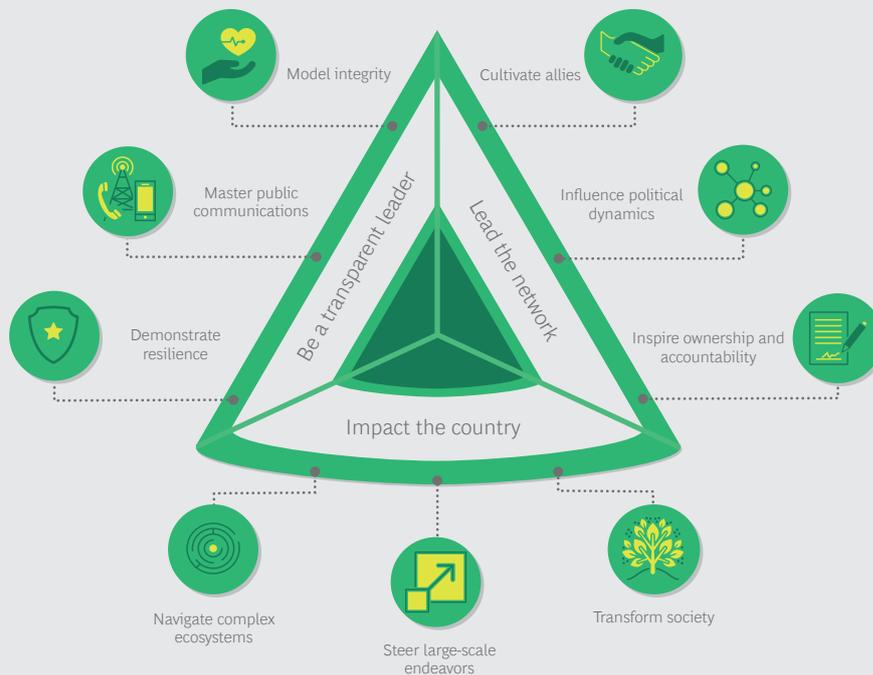
- **Model integrity.** Effective public-sector leaders are role models for uncompromising behaviors. They know that if they hold themselves to the highest possible standards, it sends a message to everyone on their team to do the same—and that to do anything less is unacceptable.
- **Master public communications.** These leaders are expert communicators. They understand that they will be scrutinized every time they do an interview, post something on social media, or interact with the public, and they act accordingly.
- **Demonstrate resilience.** They resist the frustration and resignation that can stem from overseeing large, slow-moving projects and cultivate the patience that is required to shepherd such efforts to completion.

### LEAD THE NETWORK

Public-sector leaders must be consensus builders, partnering with a variety of constituents toward common goals. They must:

- **Cultivate allies.** Effective public-sector leaders can guide a network despite the limitations within which they operate. They understand the importance of creating alliances with partners and followers who can help them navigate the bureaucracy that can stand in the way of getting things done.
- **Influence political dynamics.** They understand the significance of partnerships and teamwork in reaching a common goal. By making an effort to

## The Three Pillars of Public-Sector Leadership



Source: BCG analysis.

get to know people, they develop a clear sense of the interconnected nature of public agencies and political dynamics. That knowledge provides them with insights into how they can work with partners to overcome challenges and reach long-term goals.

- **Inspire ownership and accountability.** By holding themselves accountable, they prompt others to do likewise and, in the process, improve how people work together.

### IMPACT THE COUNTRY

Public-sector leaders must be able to steer through often complex or ill-defined circumstances as well as their own ambitions in order to oversee large-scale projects and mandates that benefit society as a whole. Therefore they must:

- **Navigate complex ecosystems.** Public-sector leaders know that their actions can have ripple effects that may extend to an entire population and country. They keep the big picture in mind in order to navigate the complex ecosystem surrounding public entities.

They work strategically with citizens, political parties, private enterprises, and other nations to foster awareness and connections.

- **Steer large-scale endeavors.** They understand that large-scale public-sector projects can last years and require input from hundreds of entities, and that managing such endeavors requires consensus building and a willingness to steer projects that may last beyond their own tenure. That holds true whether the leader is the head of an agency or just a midlevel manager.
- **Transform society.** Public-sector leaders understand that the value of the projects they manage is measured not just in dollars and cents but in the impact they have on society in general.

### A Holistic Approach to Developing Public-Sector Leaders

Older forms of leadership enablement do not sufficiently prepare government and public-agency leaders for the circumstances they face today.

BCG has developed targeted methodologies to help public-sector leaders cultivate the needed capabilities. Taken together, these methodologies represent a holistic approach to leadership enablement. The tools focus on leaders' experiences in multiple areas of life and allow them to tailor programs to their needs and design their own curricula.

Public entities are only as good as their leaders. Leaders who cannot set and follow through on strategies create risks for the organizations they lead and for society as a whole. The public sector must adopt a people strategy that includes building the capable leaders that they need to grow and prosper in the future.

### About the Authors

**Christopher Daniel** is a managing director and partner in the Dubai office of Boston Consulting Group and a core member of the Public Sector practice. You may contact him by email at [daniel.christopher@bcg.com](mailto:daniel.christopher@bcg.com).

**Stephen Remedios** is a partner and associate director in BCG's Bengaluru office and a core member of the Leadership and Talent Enablement Center. You may contact him by email at [remedios.stephen@bcg.com](mailto:remedios.stephen@bcg.com).

**Daniele Pigni** is a project leader in the firm's Singapore office and a core member of the Leadership and Talent Enablement Center. You may contact him by email at [pigni.daniele@bcg.com](mailto:pigni.daniele@bcg.com).

Boston Consulting Group partners with leaders in business and society to tackle their most important challenges and capture their greatest opportunities. BCG was the pioneer in business strategy when it was founded in 1963. Today, we help clients with total transformation—inspiring complex change, enabling organizations to grow, building competitive advantage, and driving bottom-line impact.

To succeed, organizations must blend digital and human capabilities. Our diverse, global teams bring deep industry and functional expertise and a range of perspectives to spark change. BCG delivers solutions through leading-edge management consulting along with technology and design, corporate and digital ventures—and business purpose. We work in a uniquely collaborative model across the firm and throughout all levels of the client organization, generating results that allow our clients to thrive.

© Boston Consulting Group 2019. All rights reserved. 8/19

For information or permission to reprint, please contact BCG at [permissions@bcg.com](mailto:permissions@bcg.com). To find the latest BCG content and register to receive e-alerts on this topic or others, please visit [bcg.com](http://bcg.com). Follow Boston Consulting Group on Facebook and Twitter.