

Article

Leadership, Change and Conflict: An Examination of Informal Human Resources Theory for Policy Capacity

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Abstract

In recent times, academics and practitioners have focused on the optimal processes and capabilities required to increase an organization's policy capacity, but there is little research on the human resource theory adopted by practitioners to improve public policy and its development. This article presents the results of a 2018 case study of policy capacity involving thirty-one interviews with civil servants in a small provincial government in Canada. An informal theory of policy capacity and human resources centering on leadership, conflict management, change management, and analytical capabilities is articulated using the language of practitioners. For practitioners, the findings of this article provide guidance and context for human resource strategies for policy capacity. The article concludes that there is an opportunity for academics to expand the paradigmatic boundaries of human resources research in public administration for the purposes of improving policy capacity.

Résumé

Ces derniers temps, les universitaires et les praticiens se sont concentrés sur les processus et les capacités optimaux nécessaires pour accroître la capacité politique d'une organisation, mais il existe peu de recherches sur la théorie des ressources humaines adoptée par les praticiens pour améliorer la politique publique et son développement. Cet article présente les résultats d'une étude de cas de 2018 sur la capacité politique impliquant trente et un entretiens avec des fonctionnaires d'un petit gouvernement provincial au Canada. Une théorie informelle de la capacité politique et des ressources humaines centrée sur le leadership, la gestion des conflits, la gestion du changement et les capacités analytiques est articulée en utilisant le langage des praticiens. Pour les praticiens, les conclusions de cet article fournissent des orientations et un contexte pour les stratégies de ressources humaines pour la capacité politique. L'article conclut qu'il existe une opportunité pour les universitaires d'élargir les frontières paradigmatiques de la recherche sur les ressources humaines dans l'administration publique dans le but d'améliorer la capacité politique.

Keywords: Qualitative, case study, semi-structured interviews, public sector, sub-national, Canada, Prince Edward Island

Mots-clés : Entretiens qualitatifs, étude de cas, semi-structurés, secteur public, sous-national, Canada, Île-du-Prince-Édouard

Introduction

Today, public sector organizations require high levels of capacity to develop public policy. The study of policy capacity requires studying those involved in policy processes, namely policy actors (Weible et al., 2012). Furthermore, Judge *et al.* (2009) argued that "organizational capacity for change" during times of high levels of uncertainty is extraordinarily important for organizations. It is even more important when thought of in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The need for high levels of analytical, operational, and political competences in government has been brought into clear focus, since the introduction of the global pandemic has required rapid environmental assessments, new

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research, and the operationalization of the former through policies and programs to respond to serious public health and labour-related crises. Therefore, understanding bureaucratic policy actors' perceptions of policy capacity is important for filling gaps in knowledge and improving practice in the field.

The need for high levels of capacity among government organizations is not new, however. Technological change, new economic and social relationships, new ideas, new patterns of policymaking (Farazmand, 2009; Hubbard & Paquet, 2014, p. 8), and changes resulting from globalization have challenged governments to affect change (Klassen *et al.*, 2017, p. 4), expanded the amount of information available for government (Davis, 2000, p. 237; Brock & Buckley, 2013), and increased the need to understand and apply information to solve problems (Solomon, 1983, p. 421; Hubbard & Paquet, 2014, p. 7). These changes, compounded by the pandemic, have resulted in various degrees of uncertainty for civil servants, the organizations that employ them, and citizens alike. It is important that public sector human resource staff have the knowledge and tools to recruit, hire, train, and retain individuals with high levels of policy capacity to effectively design and implement interventions to solve contemporary challenges.

Heeding the aforementioned factors, this article presents the results of 31 interviews completed with provincial civil servants in the Canadian province of Prince Edward Island (PEI) to explore ways that HR personnel can support a public sector organization's ability to develop effective public policies.

The central research question guiding the analysis in this article is: What is the informal policy capacity HR theory constructed by policy practitioners in a small public sector organization? In answering this question, a relatively understudied aspect of HR in the policy capacity literature is considered: the HR theory constructed in the field to improve an organization's policy capacity. Grounded in the responses of civil servants, public policy concepts, and policy capacity theory, recommendations are brought forward for capacities that HR personnel should be aware of when recruiting, hiring, and training staff for policy-relevant positions. At minimum, HR personnel should operationalize policy capacity theory in job advertisements and descriptions, interview screening tools, and training. To support practitioners, researchers can continue to expand the breadth of paradigms used in HR studies. Research projects can merge HR and public administration studies using social constructivist approaches that allow for the articulation and building of new theory using the language and experience of practitioners.

Policy Capacity and Informal Theory

The article seeks to understand informal HR theory related to policy capacity in a small public sector organization. More specifically, the central aim is to articulate the informal theory identified and applied by civil servants in terms of the recruitment, hiring and retention of policy staff to strengthen policy capacity.

Policy Capacity

Policy capacity is "the set of skills and resources—or competences and capabilities—necessary to perform policy functions" (Wu *et al.* 2015, p. 165). It encompasses analytical, operational and political competences at the individual, organizational and systemic levels (Wu *et al.*, 2015). Increasingly, policy workers are required to employ change management

skills to navigate competing stakeholder interests and to coordinate projects that impact multiple organizations (Johnston, 2005). A high level of policy capacity within a public service is important for avoiding policy failure (Mendez & Dussauge-Laguna, 2017, p. 72; Wellstead *et al.*, 2017, p. 39). Policy capacity, therefore, has implications for a public sector organization's likelihood of achieving its public policy goals and, ultimately, the state's ability to govern (Painter & Pierre, 2005).

As shown in Table 1, it is important that policy-relevant staff have strong analytical, operational, and political capacities. *Analytical capacity* is the ability for an individual to complete policy-relevant research, *operational capacity* is the ability to manage such functions as planning, budgeting, delegating, and directing, and *political capacity* is the ability to understand policy processes, communicate effectively with stakeholders, and build consensus (Wu *et al.*, 2018).

Table 1 Policy Capacity Theory at the Individual Level

Level	Type		
	Analytical Capacity	Operational Capacity	Political Capacity
Individual	Domain knowledge General research skills Skills in policy analysis	Visionary leadership Expertise in planning and coordinating Expertise in staffing Expertise in budgeting Expertise in directing and delegating	Knowledge about policy processes Knowledge about stakeholder opinions Skills in communication Skills in negotiation Skills in consensus building

Note. Adapted from Ramesh, Howlett and Saguin, 2016; Wu, Ramesh and Howlett, 2018

While there are also important factors at the organizational (meso) and systemic (macro) level to consider, in theory, when a civil servant's analytical, operational, and political capacities are strong, they are more prepared to identify problems and develop solutions (Wu *et al.*, 2018, p. 6) (i.e., public policy). Furthermore, policy capacity is notoriously difficult to operationalize and measure. This is in part due to a lack of agreement on concepts (Wu *et al.*, 2015) and the fact that there is practically an innumerable amount of factors promoting or limiting policy capacity in an organization's environment which makes operationalization and precise measurement difficult, if not impossible (see Peters, 2015). As such, policy capacity researchers have argued that studies "should use a range of qualitative methods that employ the judgement of policy practitioners themselves in evaluating policy capacity, rather than attempting to measure policy capacity according to 'objective' measures of policy outcomes or explicit evaluative criteria" (Gleeson *et al.*, 2009, p. 14).

Policy capacity in PEI has been examined with a focus on practitioners' conceptualizations of policy work (Cameron, 2022a), training (Cameron, 2022b), research ethics (Cameron, 2021), innovation (Cameron, 2018) and small scale (Cameron, 2020) but not human resource theory. Given HR personnel's important role in recruiting, hiring, training, and retaining staff, there are implications for HR personnel with respect to policy capacity, yet HR and policy capacity is understudied. While studies on the role of external policy

consultants in government policymaking processes shed light on one aspect of HR and the externalization of policy capacity (for example Howlett & Migone, 2013a; 2013b, 2013c, 2014), overall the existing literature on HR and policy capacity is theoretical and conceptual (for example Aucoin & Bakvis, 2005; Lindquist, 2018) with very few empirical studies (for example Craft & Daku, 2017; Craft & Harty, 2017; Kaleem, 2017).

Informal Theory

The term theory is used often and frequently misunderstood. Misunderstandings arise from different viewpoints of the world and how knowledge and reality is constructed. We know that epistemological and methodological decisions guide the way in which one understands theory: Positivist and non-positivist research differs on how theory is defined. Continuing, applied research has “paradigmatically differentiated criteria for judging the quality of theory” (Lincoln & Lynham, 2011, p. 4), namely that such theory is required to have “have immediate and direct application” (Lincoln & Lynham, 2011, p. 4, citing Dubin, 1976). Making the matter even more complicated, academics and practitioners often have vastly different viewpoints on what constitutes a theory. From the practitioner’s perspective, Hillier’s (1998) discussion of *informal theory* draws our attention to how practitioners may knowingly or unknowingly understand, develop and apply theory through reflective practice (i.e., reflection on actions taken in day-to-day work). Here, practitioners construct their reality through series of “elements, constructs and factors” (Hillier, 1998, p. 48). By studying, articulating and understanding these elements, constructs and factors, researchers can create more formal theoretical frameworks and practitioners can use this theory to inform their practice (Hillier, 1998).

In summary, both the body of policy capacity literature and human resources literature shows that informal theory building is largely missing. While the human resources literature has indeed made important contributions to the development of positivist theory, there is still a need for considering alternate paradigmatic theory building (Lincoln & Lynham, 2011).

Research Design

The present study used both social construction and the case study method. In the business and HR management literature, case study has been defined inconsistently (Lee & Saunders, 2019), while it is more uniformly applied in public administration (Johns, 2008). The case study method has been used to increase understanding of complex issues, build theory and provide “contextual analysis of a limited number of events or conditions and their relationships” (Dooley, 2002, p. 335). The case study method is therefore valuable for academics seeking to theoretically understand HR issues and for public administrators who seek to more fully understand day-to-day operations and the outcomes of their work. Similarly, socially constructivist approaches in HR research —concerned with the social construction of meaning and reality—offer the possibility for scholars to not only build new theory, but also better understand how such things as language, narratives and discourses construct (and are constructed in) the field (Turnbull, 2002).

Qualitative data from a Ph.D. study forms the basis of this article (Cameron, 2019). For the qualitative component, semi-structured interviews with deputy ministers (DM) from across the provincial Government of PEI (eleven total, 92 per cent) and interviews with managers

(M) and directors (D) at one department (twenty-one total, 95 per cent) were completed. Choosing PEI as a case study is important, given that there are approximately 119 sub-national island jurisdictions (SNIJ) across the world (Stuart, 2008). It is assumed that many SNIJ governments are relatively small, making results from a case study in the context of PEI not only useful for informing practice elsewhere, but also for future comparative research investigating policy capacity in similar SNIJs.

Interviews were completed in early 2018 (after receiving ethics approval from Ryerson University's Research Ethics Board, Toronto). To protect the anonymity of respondents, demographic information is not included. Deputy ministers were interviewed because the perspectives of this unique group of high-ranking civil servants—the “public service elite” (Evans *et al.*, 2007, p. 610)—have been recognized by researchers in the past and present as being critical to understanding public administration in practice (see Johnson 1961, p. 364; Bourgault and Dion, 1989; Bourgault, 1998, p. 3; Evans *et al.*, 2009, 2011 June, 2011 July; Baskoy *et al.*, 2011; Bourgault & Dunn, Eds., 2014). Supervisors, managers, and directors were interviewed based on academic and practical considerations. First, academic discourses have constructed managers as the “missing variable” (Meier, 2009, p. 7; see also Howlett, 2010; Howlett & Walker, 2012) in policy studies, given the observation that they are a relatively understudied group of public administrators (see also Nekola & Kohoutek, 2016; Howlett, 2017). Second, my practical experience as a provincial public servant in PEI showed that the department which was included in the study tended to be involved in projects that required collaborating with staff from across the department's divisions and with other areas of government. Horizontal work experience was assumed to support participants' perspectives grounded in their own sections and divisions and which were also informed by activities, processes, and projects occurring elsewhere in the Government (see Evans *et al.*, 2011 who made similar assumptions about the managers in their study of policy capacity). Furthermore, supervisors, managers, and directors are involved in recruitment, hiring, and training activities, making them knowledgeable of human resource practices.

A constructivist-interpretive paradigm, drawing heavily from the Charmaz (2014) method of grounded theory, shaped the analysis of data. Constructivist versions of grounded theory provide a strategy to interrogate data, reject the objectivist view of researcher-as-neutral observer, allow for pre-existing concepts to be brought into the field, and accept the idea that multiple interpretations of data are possible (Charmaz, 2008, pp. 401–402). In practice, this meant that once interviews were transcribed, interpretive labels—codes—were assigned to compare, contrast, and categorize the data (Saldaña, 2016). While coding and analyzing the data, reflexivity and integration of memos and other tacit insights from the field were triangulated to arrive at interpretations of the data.

Computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) was used to code. Nvivo 12 was used for first cycle and second cycle coding (Saldaña, 2016) which resulted in both inductive and deductive analysis. During the first cycle of coding, *initial coding* was used (Charmaz, 2014) to analyze data inductively, from the ground up, by moving from raw data (quotes) through codes, to sub-codes, to sub-sub-codes, etc. In this round of coding, labels for codes were developed *in vivo*, using the words of participants. This allowed the study to organize the corpus of data into discrete parts, which could then be described, compared, and contrasted during write-up. The second cycle of coding deductively applied *concept-driven coding* (Saldaña, 2016). Here, public policy concepts and the policy capacity theory shown in Table 1 was operationalized into a pre-determined set of codes. These codes were

assigned to the entire corpus of data to identify areas of the data where policy capacity theory was present, absent, or modified in interviewee's responses.

The credibility of the study was maintained by identifying my basic assumptions (Musson, 2004, p. 35) and maintaining notes during the study to record everyday assumptions and biases (Teusner, 2016, pp. 89, 93; 2019). Data was also linked and triangulated to develop findings (Hesse-Biber, 2010, p. 109), which were reviewed by respondents through member-checking to ensure that interpretations were accurate (Kaiser, 2009, p. 1638; Musson, 2004, p. 35). Furthermore, during interviews, care was taken not to communicate an explicit or overt normative position towards policy capacity or any other concept under study (Inwood, Johns & O'Reilly, 2011, p. 418). The risk that my tacit knowledge of the Government of PEI impacted the confirmability or dependability findings was also reduced by asking interviewees questions to obtain clarity for those statements that were only familiar to me as an insider but may not otherwise be clear to an outsider (Teusner, 2016, p. 91).

The Informal Theory Constructed by Practitioners

As mentioned, informal theory is constructed by practitioners in the field who draw on factors, elements and examples to understand their reality or a particular phenomenon. The following articulates an informal theory of policy capacity and human resources, grounded in the language of practitioners.

Public Policy

To begin, it is important to recognize that the term public policy is used and understood differently in theory and day-to-day practice. In HR research and practice, policy is often thought of as the process and outcome of codifying administrative practices or desired behaviours in a policy and procedures manual and the impact these codes have on staff (see for example Jacobson & Lambright, 2018). As shown in Table 2, when participants were asked to describe how they understood public policy, public policy was constructed in line with the typologies articulated by Guba (1984): Discretionary guide for action, goals or intents, norms of conduct, the output of the policymaking system, a problem-solving strategy, sanctioned behaviour, standing decisions, and/or client constructions.

These results confirm that Guba's (1984) typologies are still relevant for contemporary understandings of public policy. The term public policy, when used in a public sector organization, is often beyond the scope of the administrative policy manual. The broad range of ideas and meanings shown in the results demonstrate that public policy is a term that is fluid, highly contextual, interpretive, and socially constructivist in nature. For HR personnel who are responsible for staffing policy-relevant positions, it is important that they understand these discursive and substantive differences.

Leadership

Leadership was an explicit and latent theme in participants' discussions of policy capacity. More specifically, participants described how leadership skills were critical to navigate change and conflict that is often induced during, or following, policy development processes. In summary, participants said that leadership was important for making effective public policy: "*Leadership is critical to good policy*" (M13), "*Absolutely crucial!*" (D20), "*I think it is*

essential" (D5), and "*Leadership is rather critical*" (D4). To effectively manage public policy through change and conflict, there needs to be "*the right type of leadership*" (M7).

Those in leadership positions must support change. Deputy ministers, executives, directors and other members of senior management need to be supportive of change, since cultivating supportive environments for change is fundamentally related to the possibility for larger, systemic changes in public policy and governance.

Table 2 Results of Concept-Driven Coding Using Guba's Typology of Public Policy

Guba's (1984) Typology of Public Policy	Interviewee Responses to the Question, "How do you understand 'public policy'?"
Client Constructions	"[Policy is about] how government ... relates to the public socially and what the effects [of that relationship] are" (M18) "Policy impacts ... people ... [Public policy is about] really understanding what's out there that impacts our clients" (D4) "If it impacts a member of the public, then it's a public policy" (DM14)"
Discretionary Guide for Action	"It's the set of rules and guidelines" (M19) "Policy helps guide us. It gives us the guidelines for what we are supposed to do" (D4) "Policy to me means that there is a set of rules or guiding statements" (DM28)
Goals or Intents	"Anything that government or the public is doing to try and direct things in a certain avenue [is public policy]" (M15) "The ... direction that ... a department or a group is heading" (M16).
Norms of Conduct	"Public policy [means] setting the way in which government services are delivered" (D8). "You ... develop policy around a particular issue so there [is] a consistent way to operate" (DM23).
Output of the Policymaking System	"[Public policy is] basically the implementation of government decisions and programs" (DM27).
Problem-Solving Strategy	"[Public policy is how you] intend to solve ... public problems" (D20). "[Public policy is] about complex problem solving [or] responding to a ... complex problem ... [and then] deciding on a course of action" (DM26). "[Policy] takes in ... information, does the analysis, thinks through and says, 'OK, based on this ... there's eight or nine different pathways that need to be worked on to move ... forward" (DM24).
Sanctioned Behaviour	"[Public policy] is tied to acts and regulations" (M7) "[Public policy is] the rules and laws" (M15) "[Public policy means] there's very strict rules in how you deal with certain situations, that way you don't ... treat one person differently than the other" (DM25)
Standing Decisions	"Public policy to me means that there is a set of ... beliefs or values about how we apply something like legislation practice" (DM28) "[Public policies] support what we do on the ground ... [particularly] in regards to program delivery or service delivery" (D8)

Note. 'M' Manager; 'D' Director; DM 'Deputy Minister'

Being open to change requires the courage to engage in conflict and confront difficult emotions (particularly fear). As one director expressed,

if your leadership is open to change, then, you're more—I think—willing to bring ideas up to leadership for them to decide. But, if [leadership says], 'No, it's been this

way for ten years and that's how we're going to do it! You might have great ideas, but ... they are not going to go anywhere, so [you think to yourself]: 'why do I bother?' (D5).

As such, public sector executives that are open to change allow staff to feel comfortable bringing new policy ideas to their attention. Another director also alluded to the importance of support for change when they said, "When you have no leadership (or no direction to support [change]), you can't change anything, you can't do anything.... It is just not good" (D5).

The existence of fear was indeed a latent undercurrent in discussions about leadership and policy change. A deputy minister noted that, "there just needs to be an appetite for change. It's incredibly easy for you and I to sit here and say that, but when the time comes, that's when it suddenly becomes very tough to do that [i.e., change]" (DM27). The idea that it is "tough" to lead public policy through change and conflict points to the need for courage. Indeed, "a leader cannot be afraid to make changes" (D20).

Participants communicated that to effectively lead public policy through change and conflict, senior officials must have vision, knowledge of (and value for) the policy process and policy work, knowledge of policy analysis and evidence, knowledge of policy impacts, skills to empower policy workers, and skills to coordinate inter-organizational or "horizontal" policy. Furthermore, these capabilities are not necessarily exclusive to upper levels of management. Rather, these capabilities are needed when exercising policy leadership at any level of the bureaucratic hierarchy.

Perhaps one of the most important leadership capabilities for leading public policy through change and conflict is a vision for how public policy should be developed and implemented. A manager stated, "I think there has to be people with ... vision to help 'bring other people on board to get there'" (M18). A director said,

Leadership [has] to have the 'big picture' in mind. The big picture is really important! You can get caught up in the minutia sometimes. So, your leader has to see the bigger picture and be able to put all those pieces together. (D20)

Senior officials then need to initiate the process to enable this vision to be realized: "Leadership establishes the direction, enables whatever needs to be done to be put in place (for the implementation of the policy)" (M13).

Knowledge and Values

Once a vision for public policy has been constructed, those in senior leadership positions need to be able to understand and articulate optimal policy processes. A manager shared that senior officials must have "an understanding of how policy is developed" (M19). They must not only understand the policy process, but also be able to guide staff through this process. A deputy minister said, "Leadership [must] guide ... from ... development right through [to] the implementation [of policy]" (DM28).

Leading public policy through change and conflict requires that senior officials inherently value the public policy process: "They have to have a vested interest first in the policy itself" (M9). As such, they not only need to have a requisite understanding of the process, but they also must communicate to staff that a formal process and rigorous policy work is important for the development of effective public policy. "If you fail to take a measured approach to ...

policy, then it's safe to say your staff would also feel the same way and, as a result, wouldn't put the ample time and care into it as well" (DM27). As a director explained,

if leadership ... have not bought into the fact that policies are important ... and that [policy workers need to] draw on all the pieces [of evidence] ... need[ed] to create a good policy, then you're not going to create one [i.e., an effective policy]! (D4)

Value of the policy process and policy work can also help to mitigate conflict which may arise from the bureaucratic pathology to protect one's "territory" (see Sack, 1983, for a theory of human territoriality). A manager, discussing how they do not always see the value (or understand) policy work, said,

I think leadership is very important. ... If someone says, 'What's [a policy staff person] doing working on [my project]?!' ... I think we need leadership to say, "Give it a chance! Policy [workers are] ... bringing a skill set'. (M6)

Therefore, value of the policy process and policy work has a "trickle down" effect. A director alluded to this when they observed that they have "seen [their] deputy instill the importance ... for public policy development. It ... trickled down into the divisions" (D8).

More specifically than having knowledge of—and value for—the policy process, senior officials need knowledge of the analytical skills associated with effective public policy. First, senior officials need to articulate what public policy means to them. Second, they need to have an analytical mindset to synthesize evidence and other types of feedback presented to them. Finally, once deputy ministers and other senior officials have acquired knowledge of policy analysis and evidence, they then need to be able to create a demand for the supply of evidence. Directors supported the idea that effective leadership requires a concrete conceptualization of public policy: "A good leader ... understands the concept" (D10). "If you have ... strong, good leadership in a group that's trying to figure out a solution or an idea...[then] they understand the concepts of policy ... how to develop policy, and how to make good, sound decisions" (D1).

Understanding public policy as a concept also means that senior ranking public officials are "analytical about ... feedback and what it means" (M9). A demand for the supply of evidence is created when policy workers are asked, as told by a deputy minister, for "good, solid evidence, research, understanding, [and] rationale for why it is that we're doing what we're doing" (DM31). This deputy minister went on to explain, "I think ... that sends the message to ... staff...that the work is important. And [then] it's [a] self-fulfilling prophecy:... The message to ... staff says, 'This work is important'" (DM31). Another deputy minister told me how they create a demand for the supply of evidence in practice when they said,

People look to [me for] direction. Here, we don't do anything without me saying, 'Where's the evidence?', 'Show me some evidence about that.' I think that's good leadership. It sets a stage that this is what's expected in [the] department: That we don't make decisions based on tradition or what's been done in the past. That we're really setting the direction based on best practice. Demonstrating that leadership is important to ensure that that happens. (DM30)

Participants stressed that senior officials need to be able to assemble and navigate stakeholder interests with attention being paid to what the potential impacts are for new or

existing public policies: “It’s important for them to keep in tune with what’s going on and why it’s happening. And then they bring it to management ... [and] work as a team” (D4). Navigating what stakeholders perceive as potential policy impacts inevitably requires the ability to also navigate change-induced conflict: “Any good leader will take into account the implications of employees, stakeholders, multiple people. The impacts” (D20). This, in part, requires that senior leadership is “aware of what is happening in their area of responsibility, how it’s impacting clients” (D4) and also more broadly “thinking about all of the outcomes, the politics ... every piece” (D10). Conflict, as mentioned, often surfaces when policy workers seek to engage stakeholders in the policy development process. Nevertheless, as told by several managers, “Strong leadership ... focuses on ... bringing [together] ... people that can contribute to making ... a good policy; [this] is important” (M3).

Change

To facilitate change, senior officials need to have the skills to empower and support policy workers to lead change themselves: “When a director...is [a] tremendous force...[they] empower [staff and] encourage them” (DM26). This requires that deputy ministers and directors have a unique subset of communication skills. Firstly, they must explicitly communicate to staff and other individuals in the system when they support proposed changes:

It’s always good to have the backing of...the deputy minister or director, knowing that they’re going to back whatever policy you come up with [and] it’s going to be implemented, that’s a big thing. There is nothing worse than creating policy, [and] then just being shut to the side, and keep on doing what you’re doing. It’s crucial to have leadership support [the] policy you’re developing (and also when you’re preparing policy that might not be popular) ... You have [to have] someone there fighting your case and explaining why this is needed, why this is the right thing to do. (M22)

Therefore, senior officials need to have the confidence and courage to communicate and explain to stakeholders why the proposed change is needed for achieving outcomes.

Finally, those at higher levels of the bureaucracy require requisite skills for coordinating “horizontal” policies that impact multiple organizations. This is, in part, accomplished by a willingness to share information with other departments as needed. As one deputy minister explained, “there are initiatives that require a broader ... cross-departmental ... [or] whole-of-government approach” (DM31). This deputy minister went on to say, “I think [this] do[es] benefit from having a central coordinating function.... You need to have someone doing [that type of] thinking for ... all of government.” (DM31). Doing this type of horizontal “thinking” that the deputy minister was referring to requires that individuals in leadership roles from across government are willing to share information with one another. As a deputy minister explained, “I think that deputies need to recognize—deputies and directors, but deputies [in particular]—... the value of sharing information across departments” (DM14).

Hiring Policy Talent

Ensuring that there is strong policy capacity at the individual level has implications for governments' recruitment and hiring practices (Aucoin & Bakvis, 2005; Brown, Bezo, & Nanivska, 2013, p. 435; Lindquist, 2018). In addition to there being "more staff" (D8) who have "formal training [and] background knowledge around proper analysis" (D8) to undertake rigorous policy work, HR managers and others involved in hiring policy staff also need to understand how to identify individuals with these types of competencies (Lindquist & Desvaux, 2007, p. 132, pp. 135–136). As opposed to focusing on candidates whose background knowledge matches the policy domain of the organization, hiring managers should seek out individuals who have strong generalist skills in such areas as desk research, written communication, and evidence:

When a department is going to hire policy people, my guess is that right now many deputy ministers would hire someone with a specific background in their department's topic area. I think we need to think about just hiring people who can do good research, who can write, who can discern evidence. (DM21)

When hiring policy talent, HR personnel should also seek to identify individuals who have interpersonal and organizational skills to lead policy projects, which require the coordination of multiple departments (Sproule-Jones, 2000, p. 102).

Policy Awareness and Training

Participants recognized that there needs to be policy awareness for there to be strong policy capacity at the individual level. Public servants, including those who are not involved with policy analysis, need to be exposed to the dynamics of policy work and policy practices (Rasmussen, 1999, p. 334; Tenbenschel, 2006, p. 199, 210; Howlett, 2017, p. 113). "The more I am exposed to it, the more I start thinking that way" (D5). Such exposure has positive outcomes as it better equips program administrators to explain to the public why the program they are administering exists, the evidence the program is based on, and what the program's intended outcomes are (Prottas, 1978, p. 295). In other words, policy implementation may be more effective when individuals implementing the policy are aware of how and why it was developed (Maynard-Moody, Musheno, & Palumbo, 1990, p. 833). A manager reiterated this point when they said,

The more people know [about policy], the more they are able to contribute. The more they understand ... the better it is for our whole organization as we bring [policies] out to the public (M11).

For example, individual policy awareness can be increased by involving non-policy staff in the data collection, analysis, and report writing phases of policy evaluation projects (Geva-May & Thorngate, 2003, pp. 222–223; see also Pahl-Wostl, 2002 on stakeholder-based policy design and Secret, Abell, & Berlin, 2011 on guiding principles for evaluation research). As explained by a manager, "the program managers and the staff need to know the pieces that contribute ... and why you're doing it" (M19).

Training is perhaps one of the most important components of policy capacity at the individual level, particularly for strong policy analytical capacity (Howlett, 2009; Lapointe et al., 2015, p. 489). When asked to provide recommendations for how to improve policy

capacity, participants provided recommendations for training that have implications for how HR personnel design training events. In the words of several participants, “Educational opportunities” (D8) such as “having [training] sessions” (M22) “is [indeed] a big thing!” (DM25).

The need for policy capacity exists at all levels of the bureaucratic hierarchy (Lindquist & Desveaux, 2007, p. 118) and should occur as needed throughout all phases of one’s career in the civil service. Human resource development plans need to include policy capacity training for front-line, middle, and senior-level bureaucrats alike. A manager and a director explained why a “Policy 101” course would be beneficial: “I still think that ‘developing ... policy’ is still sort of an abstract term to those of us that don’t do it directly. So ... a Policy 101 course [would be beneficial]” (M3). “I don’t think it ever hurts to put on ... lunch ‘n learns. Just [the] basics: Policy 101. Just some of the basics ... to create ... better awareness” (D10). Such training needs to be ongoing and thus happen throughout all phases of a public servant’s career, particularly so that practitioner can stay aware of new policy theories, practices, and innovative techniques (Rasmussen & Callan, 2016, pp. 407–408): “You should continue training all the time, because I’m sure there’s an evolving education piece on developing policy” (M19).

Introductory policy training should also be tailored to suit the various levels of the bureaucratic hierarchy, as explained by a deputy minister who said, “There are some at the director level ... that could use sort of a half-day or a full day of training...on all the facets of policy development” (DM14). This point was furthered by a manager who said,

For training ... the first thing that comes to mind is just awareness [of] what policy is—what its purpose is for all employees within government. So not just the senior management level, or manager level. It is an understanding for all employees. (M2)

Additionally, HR personnel should identify staff who can benefit from more intensive policy training and support these individuals in completing professional programs. For example, senior policy workers can be encouraged to complete executive education programs in public policy (Rasmussen & Callan, 2016).

I think ... investment in ... multi-levels of policy training [is important] ... What I mean is, if people want to go out for a half-day refresher on policy versus ... someone who thinks they should invest a week in it. I think making [those types] of training available would be positive (DM14).

There are a range of technical and interpersonal skills associated with policy work (Mintrom, 2003; Zhang, Lee, & Yang, 2012; Kohoutek, Nekola & Veselý, 2018). Participants in the study indicated that training for technical skills should include writing, group facilitation, desk research, program theory, and logic models. The following statements from directors and managers reiterate these points: “Writing skills of course are key” (D20), “Logic models [are] great because [they are] linked ... to our day-to-day work, what we’re passionate about. We [can use] that [as a] template to do our work” (M6), “If you’re front-line delivering a program, the education you could do for them is ... on where the policies come from [i.e., program theory]” (M12), and “Facilitation training is important [as is] research training” (D1). More specifically, participants recommended the following training for interpersonal skills: “Training ... to help enhance negotiating skills” (M17), “training on decision making” (M13), “communication training, [and] conflict resolution training” (D20).

Conclusion

The findings of the study in this article provide insights for HR personnel to consider when hiring staff for policy-relevant positions and lessens a theory-practice gap by suggesting ways HR personnel can integrate policy capacity theory into HR processes. The article also articulates an informal theory of policy capacity and human resources constructed from the language of practitioners: Leadership, conflict management, change management, and analytical capabilities are important for developing the policy capacity of a small public sector organization. Each of these constitutive capabilities need to be developed by staff for an organization to develop effective public policies. These findings are largely consistent with mainstream policy capacity theory (for example Wu *et al.*, 2018).

Nevertheless, the findings are important for confirming that there is not necessarily a large divide between academic and practitioner conceptualizations of the important connections between policy capacity and human resources. Furthermore, given that organizational or jurisdictional size was not a factor that practitioners discussed during interviews, this article finds that previous studies on policy capacity and smallness (for example Cameron, 2020) may not align with practitioner theories related to HR development for policy capacity. This is not to say that smallness or “islandness” is not an important factor to consider in studies of HR or policy capacity. Rather, this study did not find that smallness or being an island was a factor considered by practitioners when they articulated an informal theory of policy capacity and HR.

This article offers practitioners support for further bridging an academic-practitioner divide: HR personnel can think about how to strategically integrate policy capacity theory into job advertisements, screening, and interview questions. The interview questions included in Table 3 serve as a reference to align staffing practices with policy capacity theory.

In the future, HR and public policy researchers may consider undertaking joint research projects that merge personnel management and policy capacity theory more closely. Participants shared that senior officials must generally support policy change and have a range of policy leadership knowledge and skills. Requisite knowledge and skills to effectively lead public policy through change and conflict, as described to me by participants, included knowledge of policy analysis and evidence, knowledge of policy impacts, skills to empower policy workers to promote change, and skills for coordinating horizontal policy. This finding supports previous work that has argued that negotiating tension is important for organizational policy capacity (Gleeson, 2009; Gleeson *et al.*, 2011). Furthermore, the finding also provides empirical support to arguments that have posited that effective policy leadership requires personnel to have considerable experience in policy analysis, managing bureaucratic politics, as well as knowledge of policy domains (see Lindquist, 2018, p. 175). In sum, these insights can support HR personnel in choosing how, in practice, they can contribute strengthening an organization’s policy capacity. The informal theory articulated in this study has shown that the role of human resource personnel in identifying, hiring, and retaining skilled policy workers is critical to ensure the effectiveness of public policy and has also worked towards filling an empirical gap in the study of policy capacity in PEI.

Table 3 Interview Questions for Identifying Policy Capacity Competencies

<u>Competency</u>	<u>Interview Question</u>
Domain knowledge	What is [health, environmental, financial, etc.] public policy? Why is it important?
General Research Skills	Describe a research project you completed. How did you ensure that the research was rigorous?
Skills in policy analysis	Describe a project you led that required you to complete analysis of a policy, program, etc. What models, frameworks, or methods did you use and why?
Visionary leadership	Describe a project you led that required change (among individuals, organizations, or processes). What was the project? What was the outcome? and What did you do to ensure that the project was successful?
Expertise in planning and coordinating	Describe an event or activity you planned or coordinated. What steps did you complete and why, and what was the outcome?
Expertise in staffing Expertise in directing and delegating	Describe a project you led that required you to lead a team. What actions did you take to ensure that the team functioned effectively?
Expertise in budgeting	Describe a project, policy, or program you managed that required you to create a budget. How did you create the budget? and What steps did you take to ensure that the project/policy/program did not go over the budget?
Knowledge about policy processes	The following is a situational question. You are a policy analyst/planner/program coordinator with [name of organization]. You have been asked to develop a new policy/program to address [name of problem]. What activities would you complete to develop the new policy/program and why?
Knowledge about stakeholder's opinions Skills in communication, negotiation, and consensus building	Describe a project you completed that involved multiple stakeholders who were experiencing conflict. What was the project? What was the outcome? and What did you do to ensure that the project was successful?

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