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Creating public value in frontline teams: an empirical exploration of shared leadership behaviour by frontline officials

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ABSTRACT

In this study, we aim to provide insight into the way in which frontline officials in teams employ leadership behaviour aimed at creating public value. We conducted 29 in-depth semi-structured narrative interviews with frontline officials and their direct supervisors from three teams in Dutch public organizations, to identify shared leadership behaviours used to stimulate decision-making based on a shared meaning of public value and to facilitate work processes that enable public value creation. Based on these findings, we formulate propositions to further study shared leadership mechanisms by frontline officials, and we point out recommendations to stimulate leadership within frontline teams.

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KEYWORDS Shared leadership; public value; frontline officials; bureaucratic decision-making; teams

Introduction

Within public organizations, the frontline is one of the ‘prime arenas for the creation of public value’ (Benington 2009, 238). Within the public context, characterized by a multiplicity of perspectives on public value, frontline officials navigate value conflicts. Frontline decision-making theory has described how value conflicts are dealt with individually by means of coping strategies and discretion (De Graaf, Huberts, and Smulders 2016; Lipsky 1980; Molander, Grimen, and Oddvar Eriksen 2012), and socially within teams by means of deliberation and collective discretion to balance various perspectives and justify decisions (Loyens 2019; Møller 2021; Raaphorst 2018; Raaphorst and Loyens 2020; Rutz and de Bont 2019; Rutz et al. 2017). However, frontline decision-making theory does not apply a behavioural perspective to discuss how colleagues stimulate and facilitate each other to make their decisions aimed at the overarching goal of creating public value. Therefore, we propose that shared leadership, a process of influencing one another to accomplish shared objectives, offers an important conceptual lens to better understand frontline work and frontline officials’ decision-making processes.

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Leadership can be understood as intentional behaviour aimed at improving the performance of a team ‘by influencing the processes that determine performance’ (Yukl 2012, 457). With regard to public value creation, leadership ‘is one means by which public value is created, lost or displaced’ (Hartley, Parker, and Beashel 2018, 275; e.g. Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg 2014, 2015b; Crosby and Bryson 2018). Public leadership literature so far mainly has considered leadership of individuals in positions with formal authority. There is, however, increased attention in managerial literature for leadership behaviours by employees without a formal leadership position (Carson, Tesluk, and Marrone 2007; D’Innocenzo, Mathieu, and Kukenberger 2016).

By studying shared leadership practices in frontline teams, we respond to the call by Van der Hoek and Kuipers (2022) to study leadership as a collective process. Frontline officials without a formal leadership position have been found to employ leadership behaviours, especially in complex work contexts as is characteristic for frontline work (e.g. Carson, Tesluk, and Marrone 2007; Pearce 2004). However, how shared leadership behaviours are enacted and by which mechanisms they contribute to public value creation in frontline teams, has not yet been studied. Hence, this study explores the following research question: ‘What shared leadership behaviours can be identified in public value creation processes in frontline teams?’

By answering this research question, we aim to make the following two contributions to the literature. To start, we aim to provide insight into the way in which frontline officials in teams employ leadership behaviour aimed at creating public value. By so doing, we intend to outline how shared leadership as conceptual lens sheds light on frontline decision-making. By demonstrating that leadership behaviour is employed, aimed at delivering public service in such a way that it reflects a shared meaning of public value, we argue that shared leadership theory offers an important contribution to the literature on frontline decision-making and public value. Second, we aim to empirically identify shared leadership behaviours and their contribution to the creation of public value. By exploring how frontline officials engage in collaborative efforts to create public value, we connect literature on shared leadership, formal leadership behaviour theory (mostly generic), and public value literature.

Conceptual framework

Public value

This article draws upon the definition of public value by Benington (2009), who understands public value as ‘what the public values; [and] second, what adds value to the public sphere’ (233). The first part of the definition counterbalances previous traditions that focussed on producers to determine value, the second part of the definition counterbalances the first part of the definition by stating that public value not only concerns individual interests of citizens, but also ‘the longer term public interest and future generations of citizens yet unborn’ (Benington 2009, 233). Value, then, is understood as ‘all that adds value to the public sphere (Benington 2009, 237) and includes ecological, political, social, and cultural dimensions.

Public value is value created for the public sphere. The public sphere is ‘a democratic space which includes, but is not co-terminus with, the state within which citizens address their collective concerns, and where individual liberties have to be protected’ (Benington 2009, 233). This does not mean that public value

necessarily can or must be created for the entire public sphere. In fact, the public sphere is constituted by multiple publics (Hartley et al. 2017), who represent competing interests and perspectives. Value, then, ‘may benefit various loci: the individual service user, the citizen, groups in society, or the entire society’ (Gyllenhammar, Eriksson, and Löfgren 2023, 3). Consequently, public value is a complex and contested notion which cannot easily be determined by means of satisfaction measurements. Rather, in line with the definition of Benington (2009), a continuing dialogue on the public interests of various (groups of) individuals, including the public interests on the long term and of minority views (Hartley et al. 2017), is needed to determine what public value entails. Hence, we understand public value as the societal impact of public service delivery for (groups of) individuals. In this article, we aim to describe how frontline officials employ shared leadership to stimulate and facilitate each other to deliver public service in such a way that it reflects a shared meaning of public value.

Public value creation processes can be facilitated within various institutions, such as but not limited to social enterprises, charities, and private and public organizations (Hartley et al. 2017). Governmental institutions have ‘a special role to play as creator of public value and a guarantor of public values and the public sphere’ (Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg 2014, 453). Within public organizations, the frontline is an important locus for public value creation (Benington 2009). Hence, the often-neglected perspective of frontline officials on public value is important, ‘because these individuals are in a position to impact both creation and destruction of value’ (Gyllenhammar, Eriksson, and Löfgren 2023, 17).

To create public value, several strategies can be applied, depending on the type of value to deliver and for whom, for example by delivering benefits for specific groups. In particular, within the public context in which organizations can exhibit power and authority, public value can also be created by imposing burdens (Moore 2014). It must be noted that public value can also be lost or destroyed (Benington and Moore 2011; Bozeman 2002).

The complexity of the public context urges frontline officials to make decisions. Frontline officials navigate this complexity not only individually by means of coping strategies and discretion (De Graaf, Huberts, and Smulders 2016; Lipsky 1980; Molander, Grimen, and Oddvar Eriksen 2012), but also socially within frontline teams. By means of deliberation (Møller 2021; Raaphorst 2021; Raaphorst and Loyens 2020) and collective discretion (Loyens 2019; Rutz and de Bont 2019; Rutz et al. 2017), frontline officials balance various perspectives and justify decisions. These concepts, however, do not discuss how team members employ leadership behaviours to stimulate and facilitate each other to create public value. Hence, shared leadership offers an important conceptual lens to understand how frontline officials create public value in teams, as it sheds light on how collaborative processes contribute to deliver public service in such a way that it reflects a shared meaning of public value.

Shared leadership

Public leadership

To study the role of leadership in public value creation processes, leadership is to be understood with a focus on the societal impact of leadership. Public leadership can be defined as ‘leadership for the common good, for the purpose

of creating public value' (Getha-Taylor et al. 2011, i84). Public leadership explicitly pays attention to matters of values, responsibility, and societal well-being (Crosby and Bryson 2018; Getha-Taylor et al. 2011). Given the complex public context, public leadership must navigate competing interests (Crosby and Bryson 2005; Hartley et al. 2017).

Behavioural perspective on shared leadership in teams

To study how public leadership manifests itself in frontline teams, we study leadership practices from a behavioural perspective. To grasp the dynamic 'interaction processes' within teams by which leadership is 'continuously negotiated and co-produced' (Ospina et al. 2020, 448), we understand shared leadership as 'a simultaneous, ongoing, mutual influence process within a team that is characterized by "serial emergence" of official as well as unofficial leaders' (Pearce 2004, 48). This means that shared leadership practices are collective practices, which manifest themselves in the dynamic interplay of interactions between team members as they enact leadership behaviour together to mutually influence one another. Within such processes of mutual influencing, we can identify 'actions started by one team member and directed towards one or several other team members' (Manheim 2017, 30), as it is unrealistic to assume that all team members employ leadership in the same manner and to the same extent. A conceptualization of shared leadership as a process of mutual influencing specifying contributions by various individual team members differs from a collective conceptualization of shared leadership in which leadership is understood to be the leadership of the group. By so doing, this article aims to theoretically and methodologically embrace the complexity of shared leadership practices (D'Innocenzo, Mathieu, and Kukenberger 2016; Zhu et al. 2018).

Where some scholars understand shared leadership from a distributed perspective to manifest itself as allocated over various leadership *functions* in the organizational structure, in this article we understand leadership from a behavioural perspective as it allows us to study the *actions* that constitute shared leadership practices. To do so, we adopt the generic definition of leadership as 'the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives' (Yukl 2006, 8). The definition has resulted in a leadership taxonomy that can be used to categorize a variety of leadership behaviours.

The taxonomy consists of four meta-categories that are considered to influence the performance of a team (Yukl 2012). Each meta-category has a different primary objective. *Task-oriented leadership behaviours* include behaviours such as planning, clarifying, monitoring and problem solving that are aimed at accomplishing work efficiently and reliably. *Relations-oriented leadership behaviours*, such as supporting, developing, recognizing and empowering, are all aimed at improving relations. *Change-oriented behaviours* include leadership behaviours such as advocating change, envisioning change, encouraging innovation and facilitating collective learning that are aimed at adapting to external developments. *External oriented leadership behaviours*, i.e. networking, external monitoring, and representing, are aimed at obtaining necessary resources and

promoting the team's interests. In this article, we aim to understand how various shared leadership behaviours contribute to creating public value.

Method

Research design and selection of teams

This study is conducted within three frontline teams in public organizations in The Netherlands as a field setting focussing on actual, situated practices is preferred over classroom and laboratory settings (D'Innocenzo, Mathieu, and Kukenberger 2016). By including several team members and their direct supervisor, shared leadership dynamics in teams can be explored.

Teams are selected based on two criteria. First, the teams operate at the operational level of the organization, to study frontline decision-making processes. Second, the teams are mandated to make decisions, to study actual, situated situations and corresponding leadership behaviours. As the aim of the study is to identify shared leadership behaviours and the mechanisms by which they create public value, the study is designed as an explorative study in three teams. Investigating the various perspectives of team members within one team on the value of their services as well as their behaviours allows us to gain an in-depth understanding of how shared leadership behaviours are related to processes of creating public value.

To be able to capture a variety of leadership behaviours, the teams vary from each other on potentially relevant contextual factors. See Table 1 for an overview of the teams. To start, the decision-making task of a team appears a relevant contextual factor, as decision-making has been found to be linked to (formal) leadership. Hence, we incorporated various decision-making tasks to study the role of shared leadership behaviours in decision-making practices (Cohen and Bailey 1997), which we found in various domains: a municipality team executing new policy regulations evaluating permit applications, a social insurance team advising colleagues on how to proceed in difficult cases, and a police team facing decisions in their professional work. Second, team structure appears a relevant contextual factor, as 'the composition of a team in terms of its size and characteristics such as experience [and] expertise (...) may play a role in the development of shared leadership' (Carson, Tesluk, and Marrone 2007, 1230; e.g.; Cohen and Bailey 1997). Hence, we included teams with various team structures. Third, the phase of working together appears a relevant contextual factor, as research has shown that shared leadership increases the longer the team works together (Fransen et al. 2018). Hence, we included teams with various temporalities of working together.

Municipality Team (Team 1) is a multidisciplinary project team of a municipality in a medium-sized city. Following political decisions, the team was established to develop, apply, and enforce new legislation on conversion permits, a permit needed for converting a family home into rental rooms, often used for realizing student housing. Team members mainly described the public value aimed for in terms of liveability for family households, reducing discomforts such as late-night parties. However, not for all team members this was the first or only answer. They also intend to facilitate student housing, preserve rental possibilities for landlords, ensure equal access to housing for first-time home buyers. In fact, what was considered most important, was to prevent any forced evictions.

Table 1. Overview of teams.

	Team 1: Municipality Team	Team 2: Social Insurance Team	Team 3: Police Investigation Team
<i>Organisation</i>	Municipality of medium sized city	Dutch Social Insurance Bank	Netherlands Police
<i>Organisation level</i>	Operational	Operational	Operational
<i>Team structure</i>	Multidisciplinary project team	Multidisciplinary expert team, pilot	Project team
<i>Phase of working together at the time of research</i>	Working together half-time since one year, expecting to work together for another two years	Meeting weekly for two hours for a few months, as a pilot team not knowing for how long they would be working together	Worked together full-time for the duration of the investigation
<i>Decision-making task</i>	Executing new policy regulations: evaluating conversion permit applications	Advising colleagues how to proceed in difficult cases	Investigating a murder case
<i>Perspectives on public value the team narrates their aim to create</i>	Liveability for family households Housing arrangements for students Rental possibilities for landlords Equal access to housing for first-time home buyers Preventing any forced evictions	Depends on the policy regulation, generally formulated as 'helping the customer'	Truth, to provide ... Answers for the victims' relatives Justice Appropriate sentence to imprisonment Restoring the victims' dignity Preventing a false conviction Safety
<i>Team members</i>	13 frontline officials 1 supervisor	4 frontline officials 1 facilitator 1 supervisor	6 frontline officials 2 supervisors
<i>Interviews per team</i>	12 frontline officials 2 supervisors	7 frontline officials 1 facilitator 1 supervisor	4 frontline officials 2 supervisors
<i>Exploratory conversations</i>	1	6	8

Social Insurance Team (Team 2) is a multidisciplinary pilot-team tasked with delivering advice to colleagues who attend one team meeting to discuss how to proceed in a difficult file. Team members describe the public value aimed for in general terms such as helping the customer and finding solutions. Within the context of respective insurance schemes, the public value aimed for is described in more detail. For example, in the context of social welfare benefit public value creation is described as providing independence for welfare benefit recipients, but also as making sure that the scheme remains affordable for society at large.

Police Investigation Team (Team 3) is a police investigation project team. Composed around a specific dossier, the project team investigates a murder case. Team members univocally consider it their task to uncover the course of events of the fatal night and describe the public value aimed for in terms of 'truth'. Truth is understood as beneficial for several purposes such as restoring the victims' dignity, contributing to an appropriate sentence to imprisonment and punishment of the perpetrator, and preventing a false conviction. In some situations, various purposes conflict. For example, in this case, the convicted defendant proposed to share more information about the night of the murder in return for a reduction of his sentence to imprisonment. Answers for the victims' relatives, hence, could be provided by

reducing the sentence to imprisonment of the convicted defendant, whereas a sentence to imprisonment is valued too – for instance in light of ensuring safety for society at large.

Data collection and analytical strategy

Data is collected by means of twenty-nine interviews. See [Table 1](#) for an overview of respondents per team. In Municipality Team (Team 1), interviews were conducted with twelve frontline officials, of whom one senior frontline official, and two supervisors. In Social Insurance Team (Team 2) interviews were conducted with four frontline officials, the facilitator, and the supervisor. Also, interviews were conducted with four frontline officials who attended a team meeting to discuss their files with the expert team. In Police Investigation Team (Team 3) interviews were conducted with four frontline officials and two supervisors. Overall, thirteen male and sixteen female respondents participated.

To relate to the respondents' perception of their work and the social dynamics within the team, interviews were structured as in-depth semi-structured narrative interviews. The interviews discussed actual situations to relate to meaningful experiences (e.g. Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003). Respondents were asked to tell a story about decision-making processes in a situation, case, or file in which they located citizens or society at large at the centre of their services. The opening question allowed for documenting their perspectives on the value of their services. To document the needed 'rich accounts of the views, actions, and choices of public leaders themselves' (Crosby and Bryson 2018, 1277), the stories were explored in more detail by asking who was involved in working on the file, which actions each of them displayed and how they experienced the interactions. This exploration allowed for documenting employed leadership behaviours, and meaningful experiences with the leadership behaviours of colleagues. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The analytical strategy combined inductive elements as well as iterations between theory and data. Initially, the interviews were coded inductively by means of detailed codes to identify various perspectives and behaviours. Examples of codes on the perspectives on the value of their services include 'value: preventing arbitrariness', 'value: nobody on the streets', and 'value: act quickly'. Examples of codes on the behaviour of team members include 'behaviour: using a metaphor', 'behaviour: finding a solution', and 'behaviour: discussing a case with colleagues'. Following, the inductive codes were confronted with theoretical concepts. Perspectives on the value of their services were confronted with the concept of public value (Benington 2009) and reconstructed into broader categories of codes highlighting various categories of values, such as value created for specific groups of citizens as well as general values such as efficiency and responsiveness. Behaviour by team members was confronted with the leadership taxonomy (Yukl 2012) and reconstructed into broader categories of codes based on the taxonomy, while adding the external oriented leadership behaviour of engaging. Also, we had a category comprising of decision-making processes, allowing us to link leadership behaviours to public value aims. The analysis was conducted in a twofold way. To start, per team similarities and differences between respondents' perspectives on the value of their service as well as the way in which they aimed to

create this were interpreted, highlighting the need for and practices of decision-making for creating public value in frontline teams. Second, various interactions during decision-making processes were interpreted, distinguishing two functions of shared leadership behaviour (*stimulating* public value-based decision-making and *facilitating* public value creation processes) and focussing on the mechanisms by which leadership behaviours contributed to creating public value.

We held fifteen exploratory conversations with relevant actors and joined regular meetings with liaisons to contextualize the interviews and made observations in two of the teams, all for which we took fieldnotes. Observations could not be conducted with Police Investigation Team (Team 3) as the team had finished the investigation at the time of research. During the observations, we were able to observe formal moments of interaction between team members – situations in which leadership could be employed. The observations had a three-fold purpose. To start, the observations helped to identify respondents, especially in Social Insurance Team (Team 2) where we invited frontline officials for an interview after they attended one team meeting to discuss a file. Second, the observations familiarized us with work practices and jargon, and identified situations to further discuss during interviews. Third, the observations informed us whether the stories explored in the interviews represented daily practice. No differences in employed leadership behaviour were observed between what was discussed in the interviews and what was encountered on the working floor.

Results

Identifying leadership challenges in frontline teams

We expected that frontline officials may find difficulties to articulate their stories in terms of leadership practices, as leadership is often conceived of as behaviour of individuals in positions with formal authority. Indeed, we found that frontline officials initially extensively and in detail describe their task and referred to social dynamics in general terms such as ‘discussing cases with the group’. This seemed to express that respondents faced difficulties recalling individual contributions in this process rather than meaning that they considered ‘the group’ as a unified whole, as respondents indicated that they did not remember what happened exactly. In line with the perspective on shared leadership used in this article, respondents narrate about several individual contributions that together constitute the social dynamics of the group.

‘You say: “Well, this is my case. I am thinking we should do this, please think along with me”. And then you hear from the others like: “I think you are right”, or “Well, you could look at it again from that perspective”. (...) And then you reply: “Let us do it this way”. And then everyone just agrees to that’. (Respondent 3, Municipality Team (Team 1), frontline official).

In this quote, Respondent 3 describes that the others can have various perspectives on a case, and concludes that *everyone*, rather than *the group*, agrees to the final proposal. The narrative structure of the interviews as well as the processual, behavioural approach to leadership by Yukl (2006, 2012) allows for documenting leadership behaviours of all team members during decision-making processes. These stories demonstrate that leadership behaviours of team members with as well as without a formal leadership position stimulate and facilitate each other to create public value. The identified examples are all practices of shared leadership behaviours among team

Table 2. Shared leadership behaviours in frontline teams aimed at creating public value.

	Shared Leadership Behaviours used to Stimulate Public Value Based Decision-Making	Shared Leadership Behaviours used to Facilitate Public Value Creation Processes
<i>Task-oriented leadership</i>	<i>Planning</i> , e.g. proposing how to proceed <i>Clarifying</i> , e.g. indicating what further steps could be taken <i>Monitoring</i> , e.g. observing the effect of policy regulations <i>Problem solving</i> , e.g. discussing the file with one another	
<i>Relations-oriented leadership</i>	<i>Supporting</i> , e.g. lending an ear <i>Empowering</i> , e.g. encouraging each other	<i>Developing</i> , e.g. educate each other on rules, regulations and procedures <i>Recognizing</i> e.g. complimenting each other on their creative solutions
<i>Change-oriented leadership</i>	<i>Advocating change</i> , e.g. stating that the team cannot proceed with the general work principles <i>Envisioning change</i> , e.g. describing a different solution	<i>Encouraging innovation</i> , e.g. asking each other to provide input to find innovative solutions <i>Facilitating collective learning</i> , e.g. proposing to dry run the team's decision-making task
<i>External oriented leadership</i>	<i>Representing</i> , e.g. discussing the situation with representatives of institutions involved in decision-making <i>Engaging</i> , e.g. asking stakeholders to express their perspective on public value	<i>External monitoring</i> , e.g. reading up on external developments <i>Networking</i> , e.g. contacting relevant professional actors across organizations

members, except for an example where we observed shared leadership behaviour between team leaders.

The stories reflect that leadership is a contextual practice. Rather than expressing generalities about leadership behaviours (e.g. ‘I always state that we cannot proceed with the general work principles’), respondents describe deliberations related to specific cases in which they made the processual decision to employ leadership. For example,: ‘Well, in my case, in this case (...) I wanted to convey [to my colleagues] the feeling that I doubted: “Should we proceed with this?”’ (Respondent 20, Social Insurance Team (Team 2), frontline official).

Further, the stories show that leadership is enacted to facilitate two challenges in public value creation processes. First, respondents narrate about leadership practices by which they *stimulate* each other to base decision-making on a shared meaning of public value. In line with broader street-level bureaucracy literature, respondents indicate that they make decisions which value to prioritize and how to interpret rules and regulations. Shared leadership as conceptual lens allows us to study the social interactions in which team members employ leadership behaviour influencing one another to deliver public service in such a way that it reflects a shared meaning of public value. Second, respondents narrate about leadership practices by which they *facilitate* work processes by which they can create public value. In this results section, these two challenges in public value creation processes and the employed shared leadership practices are descriptively portrayed. By so doing, we articulate the mechanisms by which these shared leadership behaviours contribute to creating public value. See [Table 2](#) for an overview of the identified shared leadership behaviours and its two functions in frontline teams.

Shared leadership behaviours to stimulate public value based decision-making

Leadership behaviours are enacted to *stimulate* each other to base decision-making on a shared meaning of public value when faced with value conflicts. There are two, sometimes related, types of value conflicts when creating public value. To start, respondents indicate that they face decision-making about various groups of individuals that each have different interests. In the work context of Municipality Team (Team 1), for instance, respondents navigate discrepancies between interests of students living in a student home, wanting to enjoy student life, and their neighbours who opt for a quieter lifestyle. Secondly, respondents indicate that they face decision-making about public value aims and a variety of demands they also aim to adhere to. Decision-making is based not only on the societal effect, but also on demands such as impartiality and fairness. This is particularly relevant when rules and regulations are at play. Some respondents consider rules and protocols a strict framework, reflecting a practice of treating everyone impartially. They navigate a value conflict by prioritizing the value of equal treatment, also when the regulations do not create public value:

That is my fate. I implement policy regulations and I do it as good as I can. (...) [When I do not support the policy regulations in a specific file], I do nothing. Just carry on. It is what it is. (Respondent 9, Municipality Team. (Team 1), frontline official).

Other respondents, in contrast, state that rules and regulations must be reconsidered when they effectuate outcomes that do not reflect the public value aimed for, for instance when citizens face distinct problems when applying general rules to their situation, or when regulations effectuate outcomes that those regulations did not intend. Where some respondents stress that policy makers should have thought about such situations on beforehand, other respondents stress that reality sometimes is more unruly than can be captured or foreseen in policy, and make the processual decision to employ leadership to create public value. Let us explore a few situations.

Respondent 22, frontline official working at the same organization as Social Insurance Team (Team 2), had to decide on a child support case. Child support, which is provided to one of the parents, was provided to the father. After a few years, the man appeared to be detained and the system automatically suspended the payments. Then, the mother applied for child benefit and Respondent 22 had to decide what to do. She discusses the file with a colleague.

[Respondent 21, frontline official] was the one who said: 'Then, we must reclaim the money from the father'. Then it was me who said: 'But the money was used for the children. Why should we reclaim the money? We must check with the mother whether it was used for the children'. So, I called the mother and she reported that she withdrew the money and used it for the children. Then, it felt strange for us [Respondent 21 and me] to reclaim the money. (...) I don't know who said it first, Respondent 21 or me. Or both of us did. But we both felt, maybe we should discuss it with the expert team. (Respondent 22, Social Insurance Team (Team 2), frontline official)

If we would have analysed the situation from the perspective of *collective discretionary judgement* (e.g. Rutz and de Bont 2019; Rutz et al. 2017) we would have been informed that the two frontline officials may decide to use discretion to interpret the case and deviate from rules. On the other hand, the concept of *shared leadership* attends to the behaviours that they enact to influence one another to determine how to proceed. In other words, where the notion of *collective discretionary judgement* informs us about the decision they might make, *shared leadership* attends to the behaviours that lead to

such a decision. Interpreting the story by using shared leadership as a conceptual lens, the story reveals that the interaction between the two team members comprised of a dynamic play of behaviours enacted by both team members that they employed to influence one another. Respondent 21 utilized behaviour closely related to the *task-leadership behaviour* of clarifying (e.g. Yukl 2012) when she shared her knowledge about the consequences of discovering that the man was detained, equipping Respondent 22 to contextualize general work principles. Respondent 22, then, utilized behaviour that shows similarities with the *task-leadership behaviour* of problem solving (e.g. Yukl 2012) as she proposes to check with the mother whether she was able to withdraw the money. The two team members, then, observed and concluded that the policy regulations would effectuate outcomes that those regulations did not intend: amongst other outcomes, the father would have to reimburse money that the mother had withdrawn from his bank account. Their behaviour can be interpreted as the *task-leadership behaviour* of monitoring (e.g. Yukl 2012) as they monitored the effect of their services. Then, Respondent 21 and 22 utilized behaviour closely related to the *task-leadership behaviour* of planning (e.g. Yukl 2012) when they decided that they would discuss the case with the expert team. In the team meeting, they proposed to grant child support to the mother and not reimburse the received child support from the father. This behaviour can be interpreted as the *change-oriented leadership behaviour* of advocating change (e.g. Yukl 2012). The expert team endorsed the proposal by Respondent 21 and 22.

Task-oriented and change-oriented leadership behaviours were also observed in the following situation. Different to the previously discussed situation, leadership behaviours operate in various ways. While some applications of leadership behaviours are aimed at retaining the status quo, other applications of leadership behaviours, considering the effect of public service delivery, stimulate public value based decision-making. Team members of Municipality Team (Team 1) were confronted with many permit applications in which bicycle parking could not be realized indoors, which was one of the permit requirements. In a regular weekly meeting, Respondent 11 discussed one of his files. If we would have analysed the situation from the perspective of *coping mechanisms* (De Graaf, Huberts, and Smulders 2016; Lipsky 1980) we would have been informed about how frontline officials individually can respond to cases. On the other hand, the concept of *shared leadership* behaviour highlights the leadership behaviour of team members that they employ within the interaction processes. Some colleagues proposed that the residents should find other places to park their bicycle, for instance in garage boxes across town, stressing the importance of sticking to the regulations in play. This can be interpreted as the task-oriented leadership behaviour of *monitoring* (e.g. Yukl 2012), as they considered when the permit application would meet the permit requirements. The town council, however, had allowed the team to apply a hardship clause for rental situations where indoor bicycle parking could not be realized, to prevent forced evictions. Respondent 11, also employing the *task-oriented leadership behaviour* of monitoring (e.g. Yukl 2012), considered the consequences for students, who would have to park their bicycle across town or otherwise the permit application would not be reissued. Then, he replied to his colleagues: 'It is what it is. We cannot ask these people to park their bicycle there. We have agreed on making exceptions on bicycle parking and we cannot request them to do what you propose'. This behaviour can be interpreted as the *change-oriented leadership behaviour* of advocating change (e.g. Yukl 2012). Rather than using *discretionary judgement*

(Lipsky 1980) to decide on his own about the case at hand, Respondent 11 decided to talk to his colleagues to convince them how to interpret cases like this one. Different to the leadership behaviour enacted by his colleagues aimed at adhering to rules and regulations, his leadership behaviour was aimed at considering whether they should proceed with the general work principles in view of the consequences of policy regulations for a (group of) individuals. For later meetings, he added an image of a purple crocodile, in the Netherlands a metaphor for bureaucracy, to communicate to his colleagues that their decisions should not be bureaucratic but rather would create public value. Describing to his colleagues what would be a better solution is behaviour closely related to the *change-oriented leadership behaviour* of envisioning change (e.g. Yukl 2012). As a result, all permit applications were granted.

Another story on stimulating public value based decision-making was found in the following story. Different from the previously discussed situation, shared leadership was observed by two team members with a formal leadership position, both team leader of Police Investigation Team (Team 3). Further, rather than applying leadership in the interaction with colleagues, the two team leaders applied leadership to influence the decision by a representative of another organization involved.

He has been sentenced to imprisonment. (...) One day, my phone rings. It is he. (...) He says: 'Listen to me. If I tell you the truth, can I get something done about my term of imprisonment?' And that was a serious option for us and for me. We talked about it. (...) We knew that the victims relatives hoped to learn what had happened. (...) We discussed it with the Netherlands Public Prosecution Service' (Respondent 25, Police Investigation Team (Team 3), team leader)

In terms of public value, the story by Respondent 25 narrates about the importance of truth as a way of providing further answers for the victims' relatives, revealing what had happened during the last hours of the victims' life, and about the possibility of utilizing truth to reduce the sentence to imprisonment for the convicted defendant. The story discloses that there is interaction between the team leaders. The two team leaders discussed the proposal by the convicted defendant in view of the wishes by the victims' relatives. Earlier in the interview, Respondent 25 told that he talked to one of the victims' relatives about what would add value to them. This behaviour can be interpreted as *external oriented leadership behaviour* which empathizes with the stakeholders' perspective and that we hereby describe as engaging. After considering the proposal by the convicted defendant a serious option, the team leaders employed leadership in the interaction with the Netherlands Public Prosecution Service. Although the story does not specify how this interaction unfolded, it does indicate that the team leaders 'discussed' the proposal of the convicted defendant with a representative of the Netherlands Prosecution Service. This behaviour can be interpreted as an example of the *external oriented leadership behaviour* of representing (e.g. Yukl 2012). By representing the stakeholders' perspectives to the representative, they tried to convince the actor in charge of the final decision about the team's perspective on which decision creates public value.

Faced with value conflicts, respondents consider it helpful when their colleagues acknowledge the difficulty of such experiences. Colleagues provide this support by backing a decision, by lending an ear or by asking colleagues how they feel when they face a difficult decision. Such behaviours can be interpreted as the *relations-oriented leadership behaviour* of supporting (e.g. Yukl 2012).

Shared leadership behaviours to facilitate public value creation processes

Leadership behaviours are not only enacted to *stimulate* each other to base decision-making on a shared meaning of public value. Leadership behaviours, too, are enacted to *facilitate* work processes that enable public value creation.

By means of *relations-oriented leadership* behaviours, frontline officials provide each other with information and educate each other on rules, regulations and procedures. By so doing, they instruct each other about the work processes and equip their colleagues with necessary information to execute their task. These behaviours can be interpreted as examples of the *relations-oriented leadership behaviour* of developing (e.g. Yukl 2012). In some situations, these behaviours were aimed at making sure that team members applied the rules correctly. In other situations, these behaviours helped them to strengthen their knowledge and skills to interpret rules in such a way that they contributed to creating public value. Also, respondents disclose that they give and receive compliments to/by their colleagues for example, when a creative solution has been found, showing similarities with the *relations-oriented leadership behaviour* of recognizing (e.g. Yukl 2012).

Various respondents from Police Investigation Team (Team 3) described a situation in which they facilitated their work processes, describing behaviour closely related to the *change-oriented leadership behaviour* of encouraging innovation (e.g. Yukl 2012).

So, I walked around with a colleague, and then we were like: let us think aloud, say what we see and what we think. And then we entered the bathroom. There was a washing machine. Then we said: 'Guys, that washing machine, help us. What can we do with the washing machine?' (Respondent 26, Police Investigation Team (Team 2), frontline official)

When police investigators visited the crime scene, they motivated each other to discuss what information could be retrieved from the washing machine. Upon the suggestion of a colleague to investigate the power consumption, information on the use of the washing machine was confirmed. This helped to reconstruct the timeline of the fatal night and contributed to discovering the truth about what had happened.

Change-oriented leadership was also reported in the following story by Respondent 17 of Social Insurance Team (Team 2). During one of the first meetings of the team, a pilot team established to provide expert advice to colleagues, Respondent 17 proposed to her colleagues that they would 'dry run' first by discussing a file she had to decide on. By so doing, the team would be able to experience what their role entails, and to learn by experimenting, trying, and practicing how they should make decisions and how they can create public value. This behaviour shows similarities with the *change-oriented leadership behaviour* of facilitating collective learning (e.g. Yukl 2012).

'[I wanted to discuss the case with the team], because we might discover something that could help us (...). And that is when I dropped the term "dry running". (...) Because I feel like: experimenting is experimenting, pilot is a pilot, let us practice and see how things go'. (Respondent 17, Social Insurance Team (Team 2), frontline official)

Another situation in which frontline officials facilitated their work process was encountered in the following story by Respondent 4 of Municipality Team (Team 1). Different to the previously discussed situations, leadership is employed in interaction with representatives across organizations.

'It was because we noticed these jurisprudential developments. (...) So, we thought: What does it mean for us? (...) So, we approached the municipalities of which we thought: there was

a relevant jurisprudential development there. Literally via the website and the contact form [laughs]. (...) And that eventually became a club of almost fifteen municipalities. (...) And so, we planned a meeting (...) [in which we] drafted a document with (...) a sort of hand out with tips and tricks. (...) What is and what is not useful? What are the dos and don'ts? (Respondent 4, Municipality Team)

Respondent 4 described the situation in which she and Respondent 5 discovered relevant jurisprudential developments in other municipalities by reading up on external developments. This behaviour shows characteristics of the *external oriented leadership behaviour* of external monitoring (e.g. Yukl 2012). They started interpreting the meaning of these developments for the legal grounds of their policy regulations regarding conversion permits. If the regulations would be declared invalid, the team would not be able to adequately utilize administrative coercion to enforce legalization of illegal rental situations. This was important as it would contribute to liveability for family households. They proposed in their weekly meeting that they would contact legal staff of other municipalities to find a solution. Their supervisor responded enthusiastically and encouraged them to do so, showing trust by employing the *relations-oriented leadership behaviour* of empowering (e.g. Yukl 2012). Respondent 4 and 5, then, employed behaviour which corresponds with the *external oriented leadership behaviour* of networking (e.g. Yukl 2012) to contact these municipalities. It resulted in a meeting in which they drafted a document that would help them and others to formulate sound legal grounds for their policy regulations.

Discussion

In this article, we aim to make two contributions to the literature. To start, we argue that shared leadership theory offers an important contribution to the literature on frontline decision-making and public value. Various authors rightly describe that frontline decision-making takes place within the social dynamics of frontline teams as frontline officials use deliberation (e.g. Møller 2021; Raaphorst 2021; Raaphorst and Loyens 2020) and collective discretion (e.g. Loyens 2019; Rutz and de Bont 2019; Rutz et al. 2017). Loyens (2019) describes that deliberation in the context of teams granted with collective decision contributes 'to better adapt their decision to the particular situation' (212). Møller (2021) found that such moments of deliberation are utilized to elucidate cases, mobilize knowledge, explicate their reasoning, filter idiosyncratic judgements and collectivize responsibility. Based on the work by Yukl 2006, 2012, who understands leadership as a process of influencing and facilitating others to accomplish shared objectives, we applied shared leadership as conceptual lens to study frontline decision-making and demonstrated that leadership behaviour, too, is displayed within social dynamics in frontline teams. In this respect, our study shows that frontline officials not only engage in deliberation to make decisions by balancing various perspectives and justify reasoning, but also use leadership behaviour to *stimulate* each other to make their decisions in such a way that they reflect a shared meaning of public value. In other words, shared leadership is employed to stimulate each other to deliver public value in such a way that it is aimed at an overarching goal: creating public value. This is in line with the broader public leadership perspective to consider leadership as a process to create public value (e.g. Crosby and Bryson 2005, 2018; Getha-Taylor et al. 2011; Hartley, Parker, and Beashel 2018). Frontline officials employ

leadership to navigate value conflicts between the interests of various stakeholders and to navigate value conflicts when public value aims inflict with other demands they aim to adhere to. This illustrates the characterization of public leadership as aimed at navigating competing interests given the complexity of the public context (e.g. Crosby and Bryson 2005; Hartley et al. 2017). The stories by frontline officials show that it matters how shared leadership is enacted. Monitoring, for example, is aimed at retaining the status quo when considering the *correct application* of rules and regulations, while monitoring is aimed at public value-based decision-making by considering the *effect* of rules and regulations on the (groups of) individuals involved.

Furthermore, our study shows that frontline officials not only employ leadership to navigate value conflicts in specific situations or files, they also employ leadership to facilitate that the team can execute their task. For example, where Møller (2021) defines moments in which deliberation takes place as ‘deliberative organizational routines’ (8), our study shows that leadership behaviour is employed by team members to initiate and enact such moments, for instance by asking colleagues to provide input and by inviting representatives across organizations to meet. As such, leadership is employed to *facilitate* work processes that enable public value creation.

In this article, our second aim was to connect literature on shared leadership, formal leadership behaviour theory, and public value literature by exploring how frontline officials engage in collaborative efforts to create public value. By using shared leadership (Carson, Tesluk, and Marrone 2007; D’Innocenzo, Mathieu, and Kukenberger 2016; Pearce 2004; Zhu et al. 2018) as conceptual lens for the analysis of frontline work and by using generic leadership literature (Yukl 2006, 2012) to empirically identify shared leadership behaviours and their contribution to public value creation processes, we demonstrate that while leadership is often conceived of as behaviour of individuals in positions with formal authority several behaviours of both frontline officials and their supervisors can be identified that indicate shared leadership to emerge in frontline teams. By so doing, the present study concretizes the concept of shared leadership and describes various leadership behaviours distributed over four meta-categories (see Yukl 2006, 2012). This incorporates behaviours such as observing the effect of policy regulations, backing a decision, stating that one cannot proceed with the general work principles, and contacting relevant professional actors across organizations. Hence, our first proposition reads as follows.

P1. Frontline officials and their direct supervisor employ four distinctive types of shared leadership behaviours to create public value, by which they stimulate each other to base decision-making on a shared meaning of public value and facilitate work processes that enable public value creation.

Frontline officials employ shared leadership behaviours of each of the four meta-categories of the leadership taxonomy (Yukl 2006, 2012). The taxonomy functions as an operationalization of the generic definition and is open to revision. While Yukl (2012) proposes that ‘corporate social responsibility’ (79) could be a possible meta-category to add to the taxonomy including behaviours such as ‘making decisions that consider the needs of different stakeholders’ (79), our study shows that the current four meta-categories sufficiently describe behaviours employed in public value creation processes. By empirically identifying shared leadership behaviours in frontline teams aimed at creating public value, we aimed to identify the mechanisms by which these

Table 3. Shared leadership behaviours and the mechanisms by which they contribute to creating public value.

Shared leadership categories	Shared leadership behaviours	Mechanisms by which shared leadership behaviours contribute to creating public value
Task-oriented leadership		<i>Recognizing situations where public value is at stake, and understanding what the team needs to proceed to create public value</i>
	Planning	Coordinating activities employed to create public value together
	Clarifying	Equipping one another to contextualize general work principles
	Monitoring	Contextualizing general work principles
Relations-oriented leadership	Problem solving	Resolving disturbances that hamper public value creation
		<i>Supporting each other while creating public value</i>
	Supporting	Acknowledging the difficulty of decision-making
	Developing	Building each other's problem-solving skills
Change-oriented leadership	Recognizing	Noticing the team's effort or creative solution to create public value
	Empowering	Showing trust to one another
		<i>Stimulating deliberation processes towards a shared meaning of public value</i>
	Advocating Change	Indicating the need for a different solution
	Envisioning Change	Illustrating how the different approach would effectuate public value
	Encouraging innovation	Motivating each other to find innovative solutions
External oriented leadership	Facilitating collective learning	Offering a platform to each other to practice how to create public value
		<i>Connecting multiple perspectives on public value</i>
	External monitoring	Discovering developments that may hamper public value creation
	Networking	Expanding the team's knowledge
	Representing	Convincing others about the team's perspective on public value
	Other: Engaging	Employing public perspectives on public value

shared behaviours contribute to public value creation processes. We found that the four meta-categories contribute to creating public value each in specific ways. For an overview, see [Table 3](#).

Frontline officials use task-oriented leadership to coordinate and together employ activities aimed at creating public value and to resolve disturbances that hamper public value creation. Also, task-oriented leadership is employed to contextualize general work principles and to equip one another to do so. Hence, our second proposition reads as follows.

P2. Shared task-oriented leadership contributes to public value creation by recognizing situations where public value is at stake or in conflict with other demands, and to understand what the team needs to proceed to create public value.

Relations-oriented leadership behaviour is employed to acknowledge the difficulty of decision-making in the public context and to build each other's problem-solving skills. Also, frontline officials use relations-oriented leadership to show trust to one another and to notice the team's effort or creative solution by which they create public value. Hence, our third proposition reads as follows.

P3. Shared relations-oriented leadership contributes to public value creation by supporting each other while creating public value.

Frontline officials use change-oriented leadership behaviour to indicate the need for a different solution and illustrate how such a different approach would effectuate public value. Also, change-oriented leadership is employed to motivate each other to find innovative solutions and to offer a platform to practice together how to create public value. In various stories the importance of change-oriented leadership in public value creation processes is expressed as frontline officials employ change-oriented leadership to challenge general work principles and usual ways of working, initiating deliberation whether they (still) contribute to creating public value. Hence, our fourth proposition reads as follows.

P4. Shared change-oriented leadership contributes to public value creation by stimulating deliberation processes towards a shared meaning of public value.

External oriented shared leadership behaviour is employed to discover external developments that may hamper public value creation and to convince others about the team's perspective on public value. Also, frontline officials use external oriented leadership to expand the team's knowledge based on the knowledge by relevant professional actors and by considering the wishes and needs of the public. Hence, our fifth proposition reads as follows.

P5. Shared external oriented leadership behaviour contributes to public value creation by connecting multiple perspectives on public value.

Limitations and directions for future research

Methodologically, this study shows that describing leadership behaviour in hindsight in an interview is, at times, considered difficult by respondents. In their stories, respondents initially tend to focus on their task and could not always remember what happened exactly within the social dynamics in the team. Our narrative approach enabled us to further explore respondents' stories and identify shared leadership behaviours in frontline teams and the mechanisms by which they contribute to creating public value. Further, observations in two of the teams informed us to which extent the stories explored in the interviews represented daily practice. Nevertheless, to gain more understanding of the dynamics and depth of shared leadership behaviours over time, other methodologies such as diary studies, observational studies, and experiments could document events and experiences when decisions are made and leadership is employed.

Future research on the role of shared leadership in creating public value could investigate the effects of shared leadership aimed at public value. Given the variety of perspectives on public value within and between teams and the way in which leadership is employed, public value theory, moreover, would benefit from comparative research aimed at studying contextual factors that explain similarities and differences. Research could focus on questions why frontline officials prioritize perspectives on public value differently and under what conditions they decide to utilize leadership behaviour.

Future research, too, could investigate the role various actors involved in the public value creation process. Analyses could focus on whether various actors, such as frontline officials versus their supervisor, have a distinctive role in shared leadership practices. Furthermore, the stories by respondents address

the question who determines what constitutes public value: which voices are considered relevant voices by whom, and who gets to represent the multiple perspectives? From a leadership perspective, it addresses the question what the role of leadership is in navigating a multiplicity of perspectives of different stakeholders.

Conclusion

In this article, we showed that frontline officials employ shared leadership behaviours to *stimulate* each other to base decision-making on a shared meaning of public value and to *facilitate* work processes that enable public value creation. Frontline officials employ four different types of shared leadership behaviours to create public value. Each type contributes to public value creation in a specific way. The employed leadership behaviours are contextual practices related to specific situations in which team members made the processual decision to employ leadership. Also, these behaviours are shared behaviours, as they are enacted by various frontline officials without a formal leadership position and their direct supervisor to mutually influence one another.

The results of the present study are practically relevant by indicating that leadership is not bound to individuals with a leadership position and emerges in vertical top-down relations, but also is employed by individuals without a leadership position and emerges in horizontal relations within and across teams. This means that frontline officials can, and will, employ various leadership behaviours to influence colleagues and others involved to create public value. Supervisors with a formal leadership position are encouraged to recognize and stimulate shared leadership practices in their team. In public organizations, leadership policy, and leadership development training can be aimed at acknowledging, encouraging, and developing leadership behaviours of individuals without a formal leadership position.

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Ethics approval

The authors confirm that the study meets the ethical guidelines of Leiden University. All respondents have provided informed consent.

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