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Lost in translation how public managers across hierarchical levels shape customization depending on their managerial or professional identity

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ABSTRACT

Using identity theory, we analyse how frontline, middle and top managers shape customization, dependent on their differences in professional and managerial identities. Our qualitative research shows that frontline managers prioritize professional values in managing customization, but these often conflict with managerial values. Top managers acknowledge the importance of customization and seek to balance both identities, but face challenges to maintain this focus as it moves down the hierarchy. Middle managers translate strategic goals into practice, yet their focus on managerial values cause customization to fade. This study highlights customization getting lost in translation when it cascades down the hierarchy.


ABSTRACT (NEDERLANDS)

In dit onderzoek analyseren we hoe direct leidinggevend, middenmanagers en topmanagers maatwerk vormgeven, afhankelijk van verschillen in hun professionele identiteit en managementidentiteit. We maken hiervoor gebruik van identiteitstheorie. Uit dit kwalitatieve onderzoek blijkt dat topmanagers het belang van maatwerk erkennen en proberen een balans te vinden tussen beide identiteiten. Naarmate hun visie op maatwerk door de hiërarchie naar beneden wordt overgedragen, wordt het steeds moeilijker om de focus op maatwerk vast te houden. Middenmanagers vertalen strategische doelen naar de praktijk en richten zich daarbij vooral op resultaat- en organisatiegerichte waarden, terwijl direct leidinggevend juist professionele waarden centraal stellen in hun sturing op maatwerk. Doordat deze resultaat- en organisatiegerichte waarden de overhand krijgen, verdwijnt het gedachtegoed van maatwerk gaandeweg naar de achtergrond. Deze studie laat daarmee zien dat maatwerk verloren gaat in de vertaling wanneer het verder afdaalt in de hiërarchie.

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Introduction

Central to a responsive government is the ability to listen and then respond to the preferences of its citizens. Public organizations are increasingly expected to provide customized services, which entails providing non-standardized services that are adapted to address the unique problems of citizens, helping them more effectively ensure that specific problems are addressed (Fuertes and Lindsay 2016; Needham 2011; Raaphorst 2021; E. L. Visser 2024; E. L. Visser and Kruyen 2021). Since today's public organizations face more dynamic and complex issues than previously (Feldman 2010), many scholars acknowledge the importance of *discretion* that allows professionals to tailor public services to address the citizens' needs (Brodkin 2008; Evans and Harris 2004; Lipsky 2010; Sabel, Zeitlin, and Helderman 2023; L. E. Visser and van Hulst 2023). Discretion is defined as an '*extent of freedom a worker can exercise*' (Lipsky 2010). It is a necessary condition for customization, as it allows professionals to find room in existing rules and offer citizens the best possible support. However, this is easier said than done, as rule-following enables efficiency, equal treatment and accountability (B. Bernards, Schmidt, and Groeneveld 2023; DeHart-Davis 2017).

While customization is often rooted in professional values, it is also increasingly promoted as an organizational strategy. Public organizations frequently formulate customization as a strategic goal in policy documents and performance frameworks. Yet, the operationalization of this goal remains difficult. Unlike financial or output-based targets, customization is hard to capture in measurable indicators, which complicates its integration into performance management systems. This tension between customization as a professional value and as a formal organizational objective sits at the heart of this study. We explore how leadership across different hierarchical levels influences whether and how customization is prioritized and supported. Leadership is crucial in influencing the *ability*, *willingness* and *opportunity* of professionals to use their discretion to create customized offerings (Wright 2003) and in *how* they can use their discretion to deliver customized services.

The management of discretion and thereby customization in public organizations has proven to be difficult (Gassner and Gofen 2018; Van; Berkel van, de Vries, and Knies 2022). Discretion provides professionals with autonomy and flexibility, but it requires managers to trust the professional knowledge of their employees. Frontline managers are often studied as the key regulators of the discretion afforded to professionals, and their leadership behaviour is important for shaping the discretion of professionals that allows them to execute customized services (Keulemans and Groeneveld 2019; Knies, Leisink, and

Van de Schoot 2017; Lipsky 2010; Riccucci 2005). However, frontline managers do not operate in a vacuum. Public organizations are often characterized by multiple hierarchical layers, which all play an important role in managing professionals and their use of discretion for the purpose of customization (Jacobsen et al. 2021; Knies and Leisink 2014).

Building on this understanding, this paper draws on the concept of identity to explore how hierarchical positions, (own) interests and priorities could shape the leadership behaviours of frontline managers, middle managers and top managers (Gassner and Gofen 2018). We define our key concepts as follows: hierarchical position refers to where someone is located in the organizational structure (Denison, Hooijberg, and Quinn 1995; Mintzberg 1973; Quin 1984; G. Yukl 2008) and identity represents an individual's self-perception, including their values, beliefs, and priorities (Kwok et al. 2018). While leadership behaviour can be analysed through various theoretical lenses, such as role theory, this research adopts an identity-based perspective. This allows us to explore how public managers perceive themselves and how their internalized values, beliefs, and priorities shape their leadership behaviour. Identity theory emphasizes how individuals internalize these expectations, forming an identity that reflects what they believe they should do, value, and how they should behave (Farmer, Tierney, and Kung-Mcintyre 2003; Kwok et al. 2018; Stryker and Burke 2000).

We distinguish managerial and professional identities that can each drive different leadership behaviours, enabling and stimulating professionals to deliver customized services in various ways and to different extents. We would expect hierarchical position to play a role in the salience of these identities. The expectation is that leadership behaviour, fostering more or less room for customization will depend on the salience of the managerial and professional identities at different hierarchical levels.

We analyse the identity of public managers at different levels in order to understand their leadership behaviour related to customization. Previous research has shown that leadership plays a role in the management of discretion. However, such studies investigating the management of discretion have generally focused on a single hierarchical level, most often the leadership behaviour of frontline managers or immediate supervisors (Keulemans and Groeneveld 2019; Knies, Leisink, and Van de Schoot 2017). We add to the existing literature by focusing on the identity of public managers at all hierarchical levels in order to better understand their leadership behaviour and why they steer customization in different ways and to different extents. Public organizations often formally support customization but struggle to implement it consistently

across hierarchical layers. The following research question guides our research:

How do professional and managerial identities influence how public managers at different hierarchical levels manage customization?

We seek to answer this question by considering leadership behaviour and perceptions at all hierarchical levels given that the literature on identity highlights the importance of the interaction process between leaders and followers (Grøn, Bro, and Andersen 2020; Ibarra et al. 2014). This multilevel approach aims to explore why some messages might get ‘lost in translation’ when cascading down the hierarchical chain, an aspect largely neglected in the existing literature (Grøn and Andersen 2023). In an empirical approach, this qualitative study uses interviews ($n = 22$) with public managers from five hierarchical layers and frontline workers in the municipality of The Hague, the Netherlands. This qualitative approach allows us to consider the complexity of governmental organizations and to study leadership behaviour on all hierarchical layers and how this behaviour is received by followers at lower levels of the organization.

This study contributes to the field of public management in several ways. First, by considering all hierarchical levels, and in so doing shedding light on the full leadership process that runs through the ranks. This is important as existing literature focuses on either top managers and their strategic leadership behaviour (Ferlie 2003; Johanson 2009; Lane and Wallis 2009) or at frontline managers’ street-level leadership (B. J. T. H. Bernardis 2023; Hassan et al. 2021; Keulemans and Groeneveld 2019; J. Vinzant and Crothers 1996; Zhang et al. 2020), thereby overlooking how leaders show different leadership behaviours at various hierarchical levels. While studies on ‘cascading leadership’ (Bass et al. 1987; Murphy 2005; Stordeur, Vandenberghe, and D’Hoore 2000) suggest that lower-level leaders often mirror the behaviours of higher-level leaders in a top-down process, they often fail to explore the different leadership behaviours across multiple levels (Batistič, Černe, and Vogel 2017). This study addresses this gap by using a multilevel approach to enhance our understanding of public leadership as a social process (Kuipers and Murphy 2023).

Second, previous research has often neglected the perspectives of followers, thus overlooking the differences between intended and perceived leadership behaviours (Jacobsen and Andersen 2015). By considering interactions between professionals and managers, as well as between managers at lower and higher echelons of the organization, this study thoroughly analyses managerial efforts to facilitate customization and how this is received, an important aspect that is largely neglected in current research (Gassner and Gofen 2018; Jacobsen and Andersen 2015; L. E. Visser and van Hulst 2023). By examining leadership intentions and perceptions, we will gain a better

understanding of how leadership intentions impact customization, and wherein the hierarchical chain leadership intentions and perceptions most diverge and converge.

Third, this study provides insights into how a manager's identity can shape their leadership behaviour. While identity is increasingly recognized as an important factor influencing leadership (Cecchini et al. 2024; Grøn, Bro, and Andersen 2020), research still lacks a deep exploration of how leadership is shaped through identity (Kwok et al. 2018; Marichal et al. 2018). We study the identity of public managers in terms of how they see themselves. This study offers a novel perspective on how leadership behaviour is shaped, particularly in relation to customization. Unlike other frameworks, such as leadership cascading (Yang, Zhang, and Tsui 2010) and institutional theory (Biggart and Hamilton 1987), the use of identity theory provides a much deeper understanding of the complex dynamics within public organizations by uncovering an underlying mechanism that drives managerial behaviour. Exploring public managers' self-identity to explain their leadership behaviour where it impacts customization will reveal underlying factors that drive leadership behaviours at different hierarchical levels.

In the next section, a theoretical framework is developed from which we derive propositions that guide the empirical analyses. Subsequently, the research setting is described as well as the data collection and analytical strategy, after which the findings are presented. We finish the article with a discussion of the results in light of the existing literature and public management practice.

Theoretical framework

Discretion allows professionals to adapt organizational rules to meet a client's unique needs (Sabel, Zeitlin, and Helderma 2023; L. E. Visser and van Hulst 2023). It refers to the level of autonomy a worker can exercise (Lipsky 2010) and enables professionals to find flexibility in organizational, standardized rules when making a decision (Rutz et al. 2017). Since rules tend to inhibit a customized approach (E. L. Visser and Kruijen 2021), discretion is a necessary condition for customization by allowing professionals to interpret, balance and alter existing rules (Hupe, 2013; Rutz et al. 2017). Providing room for discretion gives them the freedom to make a choice that fosters customization (Hupe, 2013).

Following the reasoning of the AMO model (Appelbaum 2000; Knies and Leisink 2013), fostering customization requires managers to: 1) ensure that professionals have the necessary skills and capacities to deliver customized services (*Ability*); 2) motivate professionals to customize (*Motivation*); and 3) help them in how to use their discretion for delivering customized services

(*Opportunity*). In public organizations, frontline managers are formally assigned the task of guiding professionals in delivering customized services in that they assess performance, and manage the distribution of resources and the delegation of tasks (Keulemans and Groeneveld 2019; J. Vinzant and Crothers 1996). However, providing discretion that allows customization places professionals in an autonomous position from their supervisors by creating room to independently make decisions when delivering public services (Hupe and Hill 2007; Lipsky 2010). This conflicts with the need of managers to dominate and control the organization's production (Lipsky 2010). This distinction between professionals and managers is strengthened by the professionals' specialized knowledge that guides their work. Their professional status influences the discretion by increasing the extent of freedom and control over their own work (Hupe and Hill 2007). These conditions challenge frontline supervisors in managing their professionals, and the discretion that is necessary for establishing the ability, motivation and opportunity of professionals in delivering customized services (Appelbaum 2000; Knies and Leisink 2013).

However, frontline managers are not the only hierarchical layer as public organizations are characterized by multiple layers of management (Rainey 2009). Public managers at all hierarchical levels play an important role in managing customization (Jacobsen et al. 2021; Knies and Leisink 2014). Since we know that different leadership styles are visible on the various hierarchical levels in an organization (Bass and Bass 2009; Hales 1986; Mintzberg 1973), it can be argued that hierarchical position can be related to different leadership behaviours, including in relation to customization (Figure 1).

When a manager obtains a higher position in an organization, the 'leader distance' increases as there is less frequent interaction between the manager and professionals (Antonakis and Atwater 2002). This makes it harder for the manager to uphold personalized relationships with professionals and to stay closely involved with the professionals' daily work. A decrease in day-to-day involvement and direct communication creates more distance wherein the manager's personal connection with the professional declines (Grøn and Andersen 2023; Gumusluoglu, Karakitapoğlu-Aygün, and Hirst 2013). This, contrasts with lower-level managers who are closely involved with the professionals' daily work (Lipsky 2010). They will recognize that autonomy and discretion are important for professionals to deliver customized services.

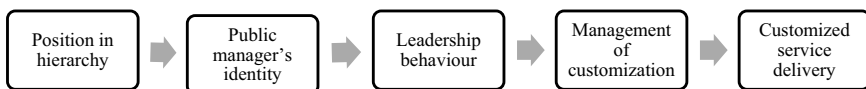


Figure 1. Illustration of the mechanisms studied in this research.

From this, we expect that lower levels of management can relate to and better understand the professional's way of working and thereby prioritize providing room for professionals.

A hierarchical position determines where someone is located within the organizational structure, while the associated 'role' includes expectations, tasks, and responsibilities tied to that position. As a manager moves higher in the hierarchy, their role changes. This reflects the changing responsibilities and expectations of their position. Moving up the hierarchy means that one's responsibility for the organization increases (Mintzberg 1973). Organizational goals, production and achieving measurable targets become more important than the daily work processes of professionals. Managers in higher hierarchical positions feel more responsible for the entire organization than lower-level managers as they have direct contact with political (external) stakeholders (Krausert 2013; Wooldridge, Schmid, and Floyd 2008). They are held accountable for the performance of the organization and whether the organizational goals are met, and therefore focus on this rather than prioritizing creating room for customization. This leads to our first proposition:

Proposition 1: Public managers' position in the organizational hierarchy influences how they manage customization, with lower-level managers fostering customization more than higher-level managers.

Identity reflects what someone values and prioritizes and explains how one behaves in certain roles and relationships. Identity influences the choices managers make, regarding their priorities. As such, it is not surprising that studies have looked at identity when investigating leadership behaviour (Grøn, Bro, and Andersen 2020; Kwok et al. 2018). These studies treat leader identity as a self-reported concept, how formal leaders see themselves and how they think they behave, when seeking to explain leadership behaviour. Since identities are predicted to influence the actions that individuals take, how they think and make sense of themselves or others, they can help explain public managers' leadership behaviour regarding customization (Oyserman 2015). This study investigates leadership identity by addressing the question: 'Who am I as a leader?' (Grøn, Bro, and Andersen 2020; see also Haslam, Reicher, and Platow 2010; Van Knippenberg et al. 2004). To understand the origins of specific leadership behaviours and the reasons behind public managers' actions, we examine the identity of public managers (Grøn, Bro, and Andersen 2020).

We focus on two types of identity among public managers: 1) a managerial identity - 'the extent to which managers view themselves as a manager' (Grøn, Bro, and Andersen 2020), and 2) a professional identity which describes 'the extent to which managers view themselves as

professionals' (Andersen and Pedersen, 2012; Grøn, Bro, and Andersen 2020). In the latter, professional norms and professional knowledge dominate when coming to a decision (Andersen and Pedersen, 2012; Grøn, Bro, and Andersen 2020). This contrasts with a managerial identity under which a manager mainly focusses on managing organizational processes. Although Grøn, Bro, and Andersen (2020) use the term 'leaders', our focus is specifically on public managers – i.e. individuals with formal managerial positions. We, therefore, interpret these identity types as indicating which identity – managerial or professional – is more central to how public managers set priorities and make decisions. The concept of leadership behaviour is used to refer to observable actions of the public managers. Combining identity theory with the AMO model provides a deeper theoretical understanding of how leadership behaviour influences customization. While the AMO model identifies how managers can influence professional's behaviour, it does not explain why certain managers emphasize these elements differently. Identity is, therefore, used to show how public managers' self-concept influences their leadership behaviour. For example, managers with a strong professional identity may naturally support discretion (opportunity) and foster intrinsic motivation by aligning with professional values. In contrast, those with a managerial identity may focus more on KPIs (ability) and controlling organizational processes, potentially at the expense of professional autonomy. In this way, identity helps explain how managers influence customization in practice.

Employees in a professional occupation have a professional identity in that '*they view themselves as a professional*' (Grøn, Bro, and Andersen 2020). Individuals with such a professional identity have views about what is right or wrong in the specific work unit by maintaining certain professional knowledge, norms and values (Freidson 2001; Ibarra 1999). For managers to be able to influence such a group to achieve organizational goals, it is important that they feel like a 'leader of the group'. This can be a challenge if the leader was formerly a 'member of the group' and thus identifies as a professional through having a background with the same professional knowledge as the occupation (Hill 1992; Ibarra 1999; London and Sherman 2021).

In this way, a manager emerges with a professional identity. These managers feel closely connected to the professionals and adhere to similar values and norms (Grøn, Bro, and Andersen 2020). Their similar backgrounds result in shared experiences which foster understanding and empathy, allowing them to acknowledge the importance of discretion and autonomy (Ashforth and Mael 1989). Recognizing the professionals' expertise, managers with a professional identity are more likely to value their team members' work and support their needs (Morgeson, DeRue, and Karam 2010). Managers who identify strongly with the profession tend to exercise leadership behaviours that

prioritize support over control (Avolio and Gardner 2005). They understand the importance of discretion and professional judgement in delivering public services. Moreover, managers with a professional identity are often intrinsically motivated by the values and goals of their profession (Ryan and Deci 2000; Thomas and Linstead 2002). This strong intrinsic motivation results in leadership behaviour focused on creating an environment that aligns with professional values, thereby supporting professionals' autonomy and discretion. Finally, managers serve as role models (Bandura 1986; Ogunfowora 2014) and should demonstrate behaviours they wish to see in their subordinates. If they show leadership behaviour that prioritizes customization, it is highly likely that their subordinates will be inspired and motivated to deliver customized services. Overall, a formal leader with a professional identity will have knowledge of the work processes of the professionals and acknowledge the importance of professionals' autonomous position and trust in them. This leads to:

Proposition 2: Lower-level public managers foster more customization than higher-level managers, because of their stronger professional identity.

Scholars have defined a managerial identity as the 'extent to which formal managers perceive themselves as managers (Epitropaki et al. 2017). Managers who see themselves as a manager have internalized managerial thinking into their behaviour. They aim to improve organizational efficiency by setting goals and achieving these through influencing others: by exerting *leadership* behaviour (G. A. Yukl 2012). This more-managerial identity results in goal-oriented leadership behaviour (Grøn, Bro, and Andersen 2020). The manager sets out to motivate and lead their followers to achieve broad organizational goals (Northouse 2001). The manager prioritizes what is important for the organization and translates visions that are set at higher hierarchical levels (DeRue and Ashford 2010; Ibarra 1999). A managerial identity highlights the importance of production and achieving targets. One could expect such motivation for achieving performance outcomes to result in leadership behaviour that is focused on controlling and dominating the work of professionals. This need for control goes against the autonomy and trust that is required for professionals to deliver customized services, which leads to:

Proposition 3: Higher-level public managers foster organizational goals over customization, because of their stronger managerial identity.

Method

Case selection

Empirical data were collected from professionals and public managers working at a municipality in a large city in the Netherlands. Interviews were conducted with employees from the same organization, working in two distinct services or departments that are both responsible for delivering social services. These departments launched a program aimed at achieving one of the organization's goals: facilitating and supporting customized services. The aim was that all employees should be able to deliver customized services in order to give each individual citizen the support they need. By interviewing professionals and managers on five hierarchical layers, we would be able to develop our theoretical argument about the relationships among identity, leadership behaviour and managing customization at a public organization.

Data collection

This study uses a qualitative approach in which interviews ($n = 22$) were conducted with public managers from five hierarchical layers and frontline workers working at the municipality (see *Appendix 1*). In total, eight professionals, three frontline managers, six middle managers, two (*the entire*) top managers and two policy staff members were asked about managing customization. Policy staff members were asked about how customization is institutionalized within organizational rules and procedures. The interviews were conducted between March and May 2023 and lasted approximately 1 h each. All participants provided written informed consent before the start of the interview.

The central goal of the interviews was to explore how managers prioritize and value customization and to discover how this is received by their subordinates. The interviews were guided by a topic list, and the same topics were addressed in each interview. The topics were as follows: hierarchical position, leadership behaviour, room for customization and leadership behaviour for customization. Questions differed for professionals and managers in that we asked for perceived and intended leadership, respectively. The interviews started informally, by asking respondents to describe their weekly tasks and meetings. This was to create a safe environment for respondents to discuss sensitive topics, such as their perceptions and experiences of the workplace.

The questions aimed at exploring the roles, priorities and interests of public managers in order to determine the identity that guides their leadership behaviour. Identity can be measured by looking at what one prioritizes, what one thinks is important or values, which guides one's behaviour and

decisions (Kwok et al. 2018). The interviews resulted in a context-sensitive assessment of theoretical concepts such as identity, leadership behaviour and managing customization (Kvale 2007). Qualitative research allows one to understand processes in their social context and provides in-depth information (Smith 2008), which is crucial for exploring underlying mechanisms such as identity as a factor that shapes leadership behaviour for customization. Interviewing multiple layers provides insights into how managing customization is experienced and perceived by the different hierarchical levels of this public organization (Jacobsen and Andersen 2015).

Analytical strategy

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed anonymously. Next, the data were analysed using topic coding (Richards, 2005). The coding processes started with initial open coding of characteristics of customization, such as ‘space’, ‘room’ and ‘freedom’. We specifically focused on *identity talk*, understood as statements where respondents articulated what they personally valued or prioritized (e.g. ranking issues such as ‘not in my top five’). This enabled us to distinguish identity talk from role-related descriptions of organizational requirements, while keeping the analysis centred on identity. Codes for professional identity included ‘aware of content-related issues’ and ‘prioritizing citizens above organizational goals’ (see *Appendix 2*). Codes for managerial identity included ‘following up annual plans’ and ‘busy with steering committees or managerial meetings’. We used sensitizing concepts in this coding process allowing codes to be guided by existing literature but adaptable to better capture the specifics of each new situation (Blumer, 1954; Bowen 2020). During this process, categories were assigned to the themes identified in the transcripts. We then searched for relationships between the codes and emerging patterns, leading to concluding remarks about identity, hierarchy, leadership, and managing customization. We compared the sensitizing concepts with the theoretical framework to reflect on our interpretations and how these might differ from existing theories.

The interviews were held in Dutch, but the included quotes have been translated into English aiming to keep the original meaning. The quotes presented in the results section are provided to illustrate and support the results. Any information that could allow the individual respondents to be identified has been omitted for privacy reasons.

Results

In the interviews, all the respondents were asked to define customization. Regardless of their hierarchical position, they all gave very similar answers. One professional said: ‘*do what is really needed, what is necessary*

for the citizen' (Professional 8). Another stated: 'when you can let go of the numbers but have been able to fully help someone' (Professional 4). A frontline manager described it as: 'customization is looking at the needs of a specific citizen' (Frontline manager 1). A middle manager: 'for me, customization is more about finding the space and coming up with a solution that is not necessarily the standard solution. Not so much a product-oriented solution in which one looks at a solution that is often used. Customization starts with looking: "what is going on and what is really needed here?"' (Middle manager 6). Similarly, a top manager said: 'having the space to do what is really needed' (Top manager 1). These citations show that there is consistency in the definition and what is needed to deliver customized services: listening to citizens' needs and having space within the system to fulfil those needs.

Experienced room for customization among professionals

The interviews show that professionals perceive little room to deliver customized services: 'the space is of course very small' (Professional 5) and 'that space you feel may not be very big' (Professional 6). Organizational pressures, such as efficiency targets, case backlogs, and weekly quotas, push professionals to rely on standard procedures rather than invest scarce time in customized solutions. Declining an application is often easier than examining a case in depth, and short-term and cost-effectiveness is prioritized over more expensive customized options. As one professional noted: 'For the organization, you want to handle a case cheaply and adequately, but you also want to make a suitable decision for the citizen. This sometimes creates frictions . . . ' (Professional 5).

Overall, we observed that professionals experience pressure to focus on efficiency and generally feel there is little space for customization. To find out how the management of customization is shaped throughout the organization, we interviewed people on every managerial level to find out about their priorities, what they value and, thus, how they behave. In relation to the existing literature, we did observe different leadership behaviours regarding customization among managers on the various hierarchical levels that can be explained by their identity.

Hierarchy and identity

From the interviews with professionals and frontline managers, we observed that frontline managers have predominantly a professional identity. They have knowledge of the work processes of professionals and can identify with their struggles. They have direct contact with professionals through one-to-one conversations where they discuss personal matters and content-related

difficulties: ‘*We discuss the caseload, but also “how are you doing?”*’ (Professional 3).

By doing so, they get a general sense of the daily work situation of professionals. They gain an understanding of their work processes and their needs in order to perform as desired. In addition, most of the interviewed frontline managers (*Frontline managers 2, 3, 4*) were former professionals. As such, they had executed the work processes themselves and know the preferred working conditions. Further, frontline managers often have the knowledge to talk about content-related issues. They attend case meetings in which they, together with professionals, discuss content-related cases. This shows that there are multiple ways in which professionals can discuss cases with their manager. Frontline managers can give professionals advice or brainstorm together to find the best solution for a case. This results in the conclusion that frontline managers have a largely professional identity and can identify themselves with the professionals as they adhere to the same norms and values: ‘*Eventually we all work to help the citizens and their interest is most important*’ (*Frontline manager 3*).

Moving up the hierarchical chain, in the interviews with middle managers, we observed that they mostly execute leadership behaviour focused on achieving organizational goals and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). Focussing on annual organizational plans they set priorities, highlights and objectives, and these guide their work (*Middle manager 1*). Respondents claimed that annual plans and KPIs ensure conversations between managers are concrete and enable them to talk about what happens in the organization and how this can be organized more efficiently to reduce caseloads (*Middle managers 1, 6*). According to frontline managers (*Frontline managers 1, 2, 3*), content-related issues or difficult cases are hardly discussed:

... it is difficult with content-related subjects, because he just has little knowledge of those. He is not a partner for discussing things on the content. I have the quality staff for that, for example. It would be easier, but I do not have that expectation. (*Frontline manager 1*)

Our observation was that middle managers’ main priority is working in the organization’s interest, and that they value this as the most important aspect. They are mostly focused on organizational goals rather than the detailed work of the executive staff (*Frontline manager 3*). Another frontline manager stated: ‘... *the higher up you go in management layers, the lower the level of knowledge becomes when it comes to content*’ (*Frontline manager 1*). So, middle managers seem to have a largely tactical and strategic focus which results in a predominantly managerial identity.

When interviewing the highest hierarchical managers (top managers) about their priorities, one explained that his role was to inspire and motivate the organizational staff in a certain direction: *'I steer for movement, I steer for vision. I have to tell my story; I have to tell which way this organization should go'* (Top manager 1). It became apparent that top managers try to organize shifts in the entire organization, relating to a predominantly managerial identity in which their leadership behaviour is focused on influencing and inspiring others: *'I am continuously propagating customization. Everywhere I go, I am trying to make people feel they have the space to be allowed ... At least, that is what I am trying to pay attention to, and to inspire people around me that they do the same'* (Top manager 1).

Nevertheless, to be able to influence employees, it is necessary to have a broad view of what is going on in the organization: *'Despite all the meeting bustle, I try to be in the city at least once a week. To walk along in my own implementing organization. I try to schedule time to take notes of what is going on with the executive staff within the organization'* (Top manager 2). We observed that they prioritize interests on all levels, meaning that top managers can identify with both professionals and managers. Top managers thus have both professional and managerial identities. In contrast to middle managers, it seems that top managers strongly prioritize customization. They explicitly mention this in interviews with external outlets such as newspapers and try to spread this message across the entire organization.

A simplified representation of the findings is illustrated in [Figures 2 and 3](#). We observe that lower management levels (frontline managers) have a predominantly professional identity based on their knowledge of the work processes and daily contact with the professionals which enable them to identify with professional norms and values. Mid-level managers have a largely managerial identity, and their priorities focus on achieving annual plans and organizational goals. Notably, [Figure 3](#) shows that top managers have a stronger managerial identity compared to mid-level managers, as they tend to combine both professional and managerial identities.

Professional identity and customization

When managers with a professional identity were asked how they manage customization, expressions like: 'to dare', 'courage', 'feel the freedom to make mistakes' and 'trust' came up as preconditions for delivering customization. These managers were acknowledging that professionals must experience space in order to be able to deliver customized services. As one respondent said:

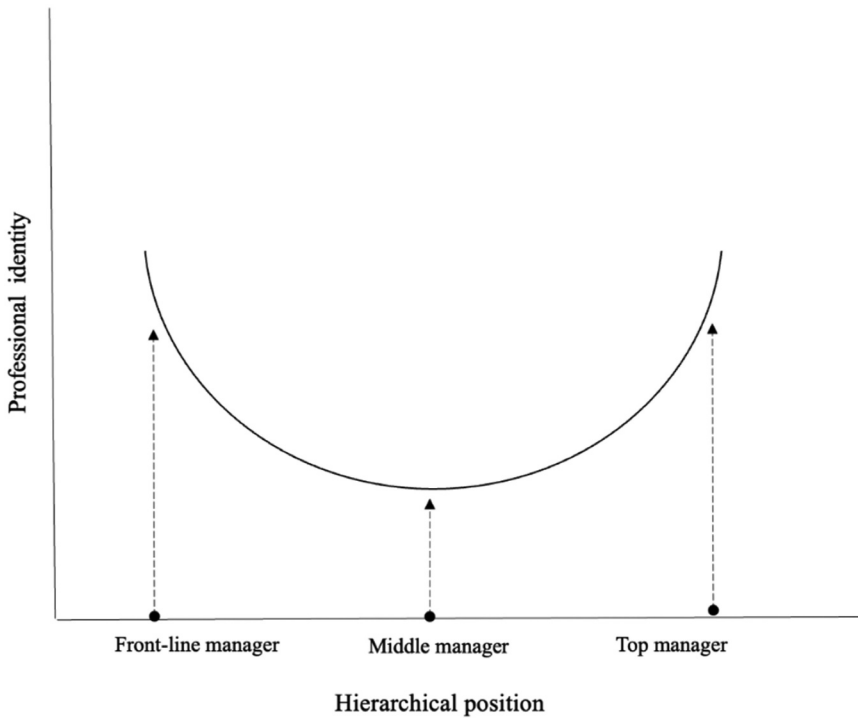


Figure 2. Professional identity and hierarchical position.

‘... giving employees the professional space to make their own decisions. Not to put it all into the same process or description. But to be able and to dare to look at each situation, each case, individually. I think it is really important to dare to make mistakes, they should have the feeling that they dare to make decisions’. (Frontline manager 2)

These managers were trying to empower their professionals by expressing trust in their decisions and expertise. They recognized that their own formal task is to create space for customization by professionals. One explicitly mentioned this in one-to-one conversations and actively stimulated his professionals to make their own decisions (*Frontline manager 2*). Although they recognize the importance of creating space, this seems easier said than done. As one manager put it: ‘... I would like professionals to utilize their freedom, but most professionals don’t feel they have the time and space for this. This makes it hard for me to guide them towards delivering customized services’ (*Frontline manager 1*). It seems that managers with a professional identity know what leadership behaviour is necessary for their professionals to deliver customized services but that they have insufficient opportunity to fully execute these leadership behaviours.

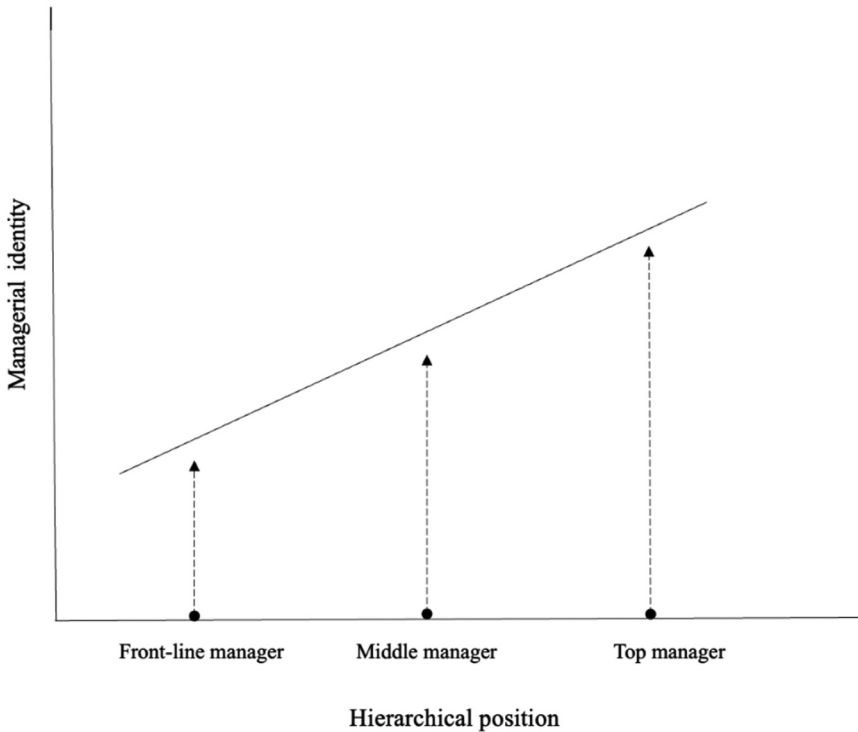


Figure 3. Managerial identity and hierarchical position.

Managerial identity and customization

We saw that managers with a predominantly managerial identity display leadership behaviour that focuses on controlling and monitoring their subordinates. They value steering through numbers, caseloads, productivity and cost-reduction. Moreover, they show planning and goal-oriented leadership behaviour, in which they are driven to achieve set goals.

When we asked the managers with a managerial identity about prioritizing customization, most middle managers did not see this as a priority: *'I have to say it is not in the managers' top-ten. In a general sense we are steering for customization, but I don't talk about it regularly because it's not in my top-five'* (Middle manager 3)

Looking at the topics discussed in meetings among managers with a managerial identity, it can be observed that customization is not discussed in their quarterly meetings and not in one-to-one conversations among managers, although *'it is in the coalition agreement, so that does not mean we give no attention to it'* (Middle manager 3). When asked how they would steer for customization, one said *'facilitating a structure in which professionals feel there is room for their expertise and knowledge'* (Middle

	Priority	Mechanisms Influencing Customization	Challenges
Frontline Managers	Facilitating and supporting professionals	Professional identity fosters room for discretion, allowing customization	Knowing what is important for customization and <i>wanting</i> to foster room for customization but limited by middle managers as they <u>have to</u> account for organizational goals.
Middle Managers	Translating strategic goals into more operational goals	Organizational goals limits flexibility; focus on efficiency and cost-reduction, pro-standardization	Top-down management and performance metrics focus on efficiency, limits flexibility and room for customization. No tools / instruments for steering at customization.
Top Management	Setting broad organizational goals and strategic priorities, building a vision	Focus on broad organizational priorities, less direct impact on customization	Emphasizing customization in theory ('words') but demanding different leadership behaviors that middle managers must address.

Figure 4. Summary table of key findings, organized by hierarchical level.

manager 6). These managers aim to facilitate the work processes of professionals by establishing organizational structures or systems that supposedly support them in delivering customized services. However, we observed the opposite – that these structures or systems are perceived by professionals as not facilitating but controlling: *'A whole organization has been set up based on cost reduction. They have now flown in a team of quality coaches. They train new people and check whether professionals have done the right thing. That's where the cost control comes in. They call it quality, but they mean costs'* (Professional 5). Professionals say they could be better facilitated if managers knew what kind of problems they face (Professional 2,4) and if they felt understood: *'it sometimes feels like another employer'* (Professional 5).

However, middle managers themselves even admit that these *'facilitating systems also have an affordability and efficiency lens'* (Middle manager 6). These systems enable professionals to deal with more cases in less time, indicating the priority is on production and reducing caseloads rather than providing professionals with more space for customization. From the interviews with professionals, it appears that the new systems are causing dissatisfaction among professionals. Their work is becoming more standardized, and many of the automatic fill-ins are not applicable in every case. According to several professionals (Professionals 5, 6, 7, 8), it actually creates more work rather than saves work. In addition, the automatic fill-ins steer the professionals in

a certain direction which is not necessarily providing them with more room to make their own decisions and thereby execute customized services.

From the interviews, we could observe a culture where managers feel the need to control and monitor the organization and steer by numbers, on the logic that *'people harshly judge when something goes wrong. There is a mechanism here, that people are risk averse and want to prevent mistakes'* (Top manager 2). A middle manager said: *'at the end of the day it is important that everything runs well, that we don't make mistakes'* (Middle manager 2). This reflects a culture in which the more senior managers establish the expectation that making mistakes has negative consequences.

From these examples, we can conclude that a managerial identity results in managers displaying leadership behaviour that focusses on organizational goals rather than fostering customization. This was acknowledged by one of the top managers, who said that managers have different roles, in which they give different meanings and content to providing space for customization (Top manager 2).

Field of tension

Frontline managers with a professional identity feel constrained in giving their teams the space they need to customize due to sensing a need to meet organizational goals set by their more managerial-oriented supervisors. This creates a tension between facilitating customization for professionals and focusing on production: *'You then get into a field of tension: do you want to empower your team members and aim for job satisfaction, or do you want to aim to meet organizational goals and focus on production'* (Frontline manager 3).

Both professionals and managers see caseload and production targets as barriers to customization. Frontline managers must account for staff turnover and sickness to more senior management. This controlling leadership behaviour contrasts with the empowering leadership behaviour that is necessary for customization. A similar tension exists between top and middle managers. While top managers do give priority to customization, and claim to offer space for it, middle managers focus more on caseloads and numbers. Middle managers recognize that aligning priorities throughout the organization is challenging: *'It is like playing the game at a birthday party where you whisper something in someone's ear and hope that it ends up the same at the bottom'* (Middle manager 3). The emphasis on customization, prioritized by top and frontline managers, is weaker at the middle-management level. Middle managers tend to focus more on control and monitoring to meet organizational goals, than on empowering professionals: *'The many mechanisms and steering implicitly push us in another direction'* (Middle manager 1).

This managerial identity that is prominent on all hierarchical levels put pressure on production and reducing caseload work, thereby hindering the possibility of customization. Professionals commented that the standardization of procedures leads to feelings of ‘*working in a factory*’ (Professional 6). Limited contact with colleagues and citizens due to digitalization has created a feeling of distance to the workplace. Professionals feel constrained by top-down policies, rules and procedures (Professionals 5, 6, 8). They have little knowledge as to what higher levels of management are occupied with and they feel that ‘*we just have to do what we are told to do*’ (Professional 6).

These experiences reflect what Røhnebæk and Breit (2022) describe as double binds: situations in which managers face conflicting demands that cannot be simultaneously satisfied. While customization is promoted as a strategic goal, the organization simultaneously imposes operational constraints – such as resource shortages, workload pressures, and accountability requirements – that limit the actual space to implement it. Middle managers, in particular, find themselves caught between the need to support frontline managers and the pressure to meet KPIs. This helps explain why employees across all hierarchical layers experience limited room to deviate from standardized procedures and enact customized approaches (see Figure 4 for summary of the key findings).

Discussion

Recent developments to better respond to citizens’ individual preferences through customized public services raises the question of how customization can be managed in public organizations. Based on qualitative interviews with local government officials, this study explores the dynamics of managing customization across hierarchical levels. It shows that public managers at the various levels demonstrate different leadership behaviour, prioritizing customization to varying extents, which aligns with the first proposition. This can be explained by the differing saliences given to their professional and managerial identities. As such, this seems to be an important factor in the space for customization experienced by professionals.

As anticipated, this study found that frontline managers tend to have a professional identity in which they value the work of professionals and can identify with their struggles. Such managers foster customization and encourage autonomy, while also exhibiting supportive leadership behaviour (Proposition 1). However, frontline managers often face a tension between allowing professionals this flexibility and meeting organizational goals set by their superiors. Their supervisors, middle managers, were found to have a more salient managerial identity, focusing on tactical and strategic issues such as organizational goals and KPIs, and often lack knowledge of content-related issues, a finding which aligns with earlier theoretical arguments

(Northouse 2001). This supports *Proposition 3*, as the managerial identity of higher-level managers leads them to focus on organizational goals over customization. However, unlike middle managers, top managers do possess a reasonable understanding of content-related issues and frontline work processes, gained from sometimes accompanying public professionals in their work. Through this, they demonstrate greater commitment to, and appreciation of, the importance of customized services. Furthermore, a key aspect of a top manager's role is articulating a vision for the entire organization (Wooldridge, Schmid, and Floyd 2008), and this necessitates an understanding of and insights into all hierarchical levels. For this, they embody both professional and managerial identities.

These different identities held by public managers explain how they manage customization. We saw that customization is highly prioritized at the top of the organization but loses priority as it descends through the hierarchical chain of public managers. In theory, middle managers are supposed to translate top management's priorities into operating realities for frontline managers (Floyd and Wooldridge 1997). However, here, middle managers with their more salient managerial identity tend to shift their focus away from customization to more managerial goals, such as achieving KPIs that are focused on finances and turnaround times. Leadership behaviours that follow from a managerial identity conflict with leadership behaviours that would support customized services. This managerial focus passes down through all the hierarchical levels, which may limit other managers' ability to support and facilitate customization.

These findings have several implications for the public management literature. First, they show that examining leadership behaviour across multiple hierarchical levels, not just at one level, is essential to detect whether priorities are lost or distorted as they move down the hierarchical chain. This study highlights the often-overlooked importance of middle managers in public organizations (but see: Balogun and Johnson 2004; Guth and MacMillan 1986). Our findings show that middle managers are important for the successful translation of strategic objectives into operational reality because they act as crucial mediators between top management and lower levels of management. However, middle managers often struggle to correctly translate top management's strategic vision into daily operations. This insight contributes to the strategic management literature (Ferlie 2003; Johanson 2009; Lane and Wallis 2009) by highlighting the need for top managers to provide clear, actionable guidance to middle managers. Furthermore, our research expands the street-level bureaucracy literature (B. J. T. H. Bernardis 2023; Hassan et al. 2021; Keulemans and Groeneveld 2019; J. Vinzant and Crothers 1996; Zhang et al. 2020) that has traditionally focused on the importance of frontline managers but neglects the role of higher leadership levels in managing these professionals. Whilst this study

supports the importance of frontline managers in managing professionals, it also shows how frontline managers are embedded in a larger organizational setting which limits their leeway in managing professionals. Specifically, our findings show that while frontline managers seek to foster customization, middle managers can play an even more crucial role by defining the boundaries within which frontline managers operate.

Second, we contribute to the literature on leadership identity (Cecchini et al. 2024; Grøn, Bro, and Andersen 2020) by showing that identity is shaped not only by one's own characteristics and desires but also by expectations and interactions with others. By including measures of both self-reporting and employee perceptions, we have concluded that identity should not only be measured by self-reporting but that the perceptions of subordinates are just as important (DeRue and Ashford 2010). This aligns with the social identity theory that suggests that identity formation is a relational process, in which identity is continuously re-created through social interactions (Tajfel and Turner 1979). Our findings contribute to this theory by revealing that it is difficult to separate what managers internally value and what external expectations are imposed on them. Disentangling self-identity from external impositions appears crucial and, as such, identity should not be viewed solely as a self-determined concept (Jacobsen and Andersen 2015; Van Knippenberg et al. 2004).

Finally, while this study adopts an identity-based perspective to analyse leadership behaviour and its impact on customization, future research could benefit from approaching the topic through alternative theoretical lenses. For instance, a sociological perspective drawing on role theory could offer valuable insights into how formal expectations and institutionalized norms shape leadership behaviour. Whereas identity theory highlights internalized values and self-perceptions, role theory focuses more explicitly on the social structures and expectations that influence behaviour. Such complementary perspectives may enrich our understanding of the tensions between managerial roles and professional values of managers in public organizations.

In addition to helping to fill the knowledge gaps outlined in the introduction, our findings indicate that, to enable managers at all hierarchical levels to effectively execute leadership behaviours that support customization, it is essential to create a work environment that fosters such practices. One key element emerging from our data is the influence of the organizational climate, particularly the extent to which managers feel supported in taking initiative and voicing alternative approaches. In this regard, psychological safety appears to play a crucial role in shaping leadership behaviour.

Many managers indicated that they did not feel comfortable advocating for customized approaches, citing fear of negative consequences, lack of support from higher-ups, or misalignment with rigid organizational performance goals. These comments often implicitly or explicitly referred to

aspects of psychological safety, which can be defined as ‘feeling comfortable sharing concerns and mistakes, without the fear of embarrassment or retribution’ (Edmondson, 1999; A. C. Edmondson 2019, xvi). These constraints are visible throughout the organization as both professionals and managers experience challenges in their actions and communications concerning how to balance multiple, sometimes conflicting, goals such as customization and achieving KPIs focused on finances and turnaround times. This observation implies that the working environment can influence future efforts to improve the management of customization.

We recommend further investigation into the role of psychological safety throughout the entire chain of command. It appears that psychological safety influences managers’ ability to manage for customized services across hierarchical levels. Specifically, one might expect a psychologically safe team environment, to play a key role. In such an environment, employees feel safe to take risks and deviate from standardized rules and procedures, which is crucial for delivering and managing customized services (B. Bernards, Schmidt, and Groeneveld 2023). Our research suggests that psychological safety is essential not only at the frontline – where the delivery of customization occurs – but also throughout the entire organizational hierarchy as it plays an equally important role in managing customization among public managers. This highlights the role of psychological safety at the managerial level, which is often overlooked in the existing leadership literature (A. C. Edmondson and Bransby 2023). Ultimately, fostering a psychologically safe organization is key for managers at all hierarchical levels feeling able to execute the leadership behaviour they aspire to execute.

This study has several limitations that could guide further research. First, this study relies on qualitative interviews and, while this is a valid method in studying social identity, it might overlook aspects of the context that play a role in shaping leadership identity. Interviews provide information on intentions and perceptions of leadership behaviour, but neglect how individuals define themselves through their roles, which can vary by context (Biddle 2013). For instance, a manager might adopt different identities in different situations. Future research could therefore benefit from observational studies (Cook and Meyer 2017) that would capture a more comprehensive view of how identity influences leadership behaviour related to customization and enable a better differentiation between role and social identity across various contexts (Bruskin 2019).

Second, this research is conducted within the context of a Dutch local government organization, which raises the question of to what extent the context impacts on the generalizability of the findings. On the one hand, our findings regarding the importance of middle management in translating strategic goals to frontline reality would seem to broadly apply to the public sector since many public sector organizations worldwide are characterized by

high levels of hierarchy and multiple hierarchical layers (Rainey 2009). On the other hand, the Dutch context might well have some unique characteristics that justify research in other contexts. While the concept of responsive government is not new or unique to the Dutch context (e.g. Stivers 1994), the emphasis on customization is a particularly strong characteristic in the Netherlands. This emphasis on customization has been introduced in a relatively strongly legalistic Dutch civil service system (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011) that has been characterized by a dominant formal hierarchy and standardized rules (Weber 1922). As a consequence, customization may, in the Dutch context, lead to a greater divergence between managerial and professional identities than in more flexible systems, such as those in Anglo-Saxon countries (e.g. UK, US). In contrast, in more legalistic systems, such as those in Southern Europe or Germany (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011), public organizations tend to be characterized by an even stricter hierarchical structure than in the Netherlands with more rule-following behaviour and a lack of focus on responsiveness, which is likely to limit leadership behaviour for customization. Future research could explore similar dynamics in other national settings, particularly in Anglo-Saxon or Scandinavian contexts, where discretion and flexibility differ significantly, which might impact the room for customization.

Conclusions

The different identities held by public managers at various levels – frontline, middle and top – lead to differing emphases on customization. Frontline managers prioritize supporting customization and autonomy based on a salient professional identity but often struggle to align this with the organizational goals set by middle managers. Conversely, middle managers tend to focus on managerial objectives such as KPIs, which can lead them to downplay customization, despite their key role as mediators between top managers and professionals. Top managers recognize the importance of customization while balancing professional and managerial identities, but face challenges in ensuring that this priority is maintained as it cascades down through the organization. Ultimately, appropriate leadership behaviour across all hierarchical levels is essential for managing customization and ensuring it remains a priority when tumbling down through the hierarchy. This study highlights the important, yet often overlooked, role of middle managers in successfully translating strategic objectives into operational realities.

Our findings show that middle managers face conflicting demands: enabling customization and accounting for performances. This ambiguity often results in limited or neglected room for customization. Without clear guidelines, customization becomes subject to personal

priorities and translations. It becomes subjective rather than a standardized practice. All in all, quality is hard to measure in quantitative numbers. To address this, public organizations should refine their translation processes by providing middle managers with concrete tools and structured guidance on how to operationalize (and measure) customization. This could involve revising KPIs to explicitly include customization objectives (such as tracking the percentage of cases where procedures are adapted to client needs), offering training to help middle managers balance customization with managerial targets, and fostering dialogue through joint case reviews across management levels that ensure that strategic priorities are consistently communicated and understood.

However, the question then arises as to whether the management of customization is a problem of lost priorities or if it primarily a matter of translation issues. We argue that it is a combination of both. While top managers tend to emphasize customization more than middle managers, this discrepancy may arise from middle managers lacking the tools to prioritize effectively. In other words, middle managers simply do not know *how* to translate strategical goals into actionable practices. This difficulty in translation can prevent managers from steering towards customization. To address both issues, we encourage public organizations to adjust their KPIs to make customization more concrete and actionable for middle managers ensuring that these priorities do not get *lost in translation*.

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