Leadership beyond hierarchies, toward public value: exploring, explaining and enhancing leadership in public sector networks

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Organization-level mechanisms of leadership in public sector interorganizational networks: A multiple embedded case study[3]

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Author statement

This chapter was co-authored with my supervisors. I was responsible for all data collection, analysis, and writing. They contributed conceptual and methodological ideas, especially related to conducting interviews. For instance, they provided ideas on how to ask respondents to reflect on specific situations in which they demonstrated or experienced leadership behaviors. They also asked reflective questions throughout the process, and provided constructive feedback on drafts and interpretations of the empirical data. They also critically reflected on structuring the findings, focusing on how organizational context interacts with participants' ability to exhibit leadership, and how this in turn manifests itself at the network level.

3.1 Introduction

Over the past two decades, the public sector has experienced a rise in public sector interorganizational networks, hereafter referred to as 'networks' (Klijn, 2020; Crosby and Bryson, 2010; Sullivan, Williams, and Jeffares, 2012). These networks encompass collaborative arrangements among three or more public sector entities, aiming to achieve shared objectives (Carboni et al., 2019). The proliferation of networks is unsurprising, given their multifarious advantages. Networks provide a platform for organizations to collectively address intricate challenges beyond individual capacities (Huxham, 1996). By pooling resources and expertise, networks enhance services for citizens and communities (Bianchi et al., 2021), ultimately advancing public value delivery through enriched collaboration and improved outcomes (Bryson et al., 2006).

Simultaneous with the network upsurge, academic literature on network dynamics and leadership has also grown. Prior studies underscore leadership's catalytic role in fostering effective collaboration. Authors highlight leadership's role in mobilizing actors, resources, and member commitment toward common objectives (Morse, 2010; Ansell and Gash, 2008; Agranoff and McGuire, 2001). Scholarly contributions emphasize the role of network leadership in creating synergy between organizational and network objectives (Huxham and Vangen, 2013; Lemaire, 2020; McGuire and Agranoff, 2011), as networks ideally yield both individual and collective benefits (Huxham and Vangen, 2013). Misalignment between network objectives and member mandates impedes member commitment (McGuire and Agranoff, 2011), necessitating effective network leadership to harmonize these goals for congruence.

While leadership's pivotal role in network effectiveness is acknowledged, much remains unknown about the contextual factors which shape individual network members' leadership in these contexts. This is unfortunate, as previous research does illustrate that whether and how an actor exhibits leadership behavior, however, is partly determined by organizational factors (Hammer and Turk 1987). Hence, it is relevant to study what shapes individual network members to exhibit or constrain from (types of) leadership behavior in networked contexts.

Studying *organization-level factors* offers a fruitful starting point. Prior research highlights organization-level factors influencing employees' boundary spanning activities (Van Meerkerk and Edelenbos, 2018). Notably, influences like positive or negative reinforcement

from superiors and peers, coupled with performance feedback, impact network participation (Stamper and Johlke, 2003; Arnett and Wittmann, 2014). Similarly, distinct characteristics of public sector entities may stimulate or discourage employee involvement in inter-organizational collaboration. For instance, the political environment in which public sector employees operate can either foster or hinder networking endeavors (Rainey, 2009).

While organization-level factors impact the opportunity of employees to engage with actors outside of their organization and participate in networking activities, the ways in which these organization-level factors interact with network leadership remains unexplored. For instance, it is unclear whether organization-level factors shape individuals' opportunity to exhibit leadership in networks. This study addresses this gap, aiming to uncover the role of organizational-level factors as enablers or constraints for leadership among representatives of participating organizations in networks. The central question is: *"How do organization-level factors shape network participants' opportunities to exhibit leadership behavior, and how do they relate to the leadership process in public sector interorganizational networks?"*

This research contributes by identifying underlying mechanisms of network leadership, specifically whether and how organizational-level factors affect leadership exhibited by individual network members.

The paper proceeds as follows. The subsequent section reviews prior studies on public sector leadership and networks, introducing seven organization-level factors potentially impacting network leadership. The case study design focuses on a Crime Intervention Network selecting interventions for crime response. The analysis dissects (1) how organization-level factors affect individual network members' leadership and (2) resulting network leadership implications.

3.2 Literature review and theoretical framework

Prior studies depict network leadership as a 'catalyst' for collaboration (Morse 2010; Keast and Mandell 2013; Emerson, Nabatchi, and Balogh 2012). This study defines leadership as a process that involves influencing and inspiring others to achieve a common goal or purpose (Yukl 2012). In terms of behavior, leadership encompasses a range of actions leaders use to motivate and engage others, build relationships, and facilitate change. Leadership thus contains an individual element – *behaviors* exercised by individuals – and a collective element: a *process* through which participants motivate each other to achieve a common goal.

In networks, leadership identifies and engages actors, garners support for shared goals, and facilitates communication (McGuire 2002). Leadership fosters trust and understanding vital for productive collaboration (Huxham and Vangen 2000). Network participants exhibit varied leadership behaviors: resource identification, information sharing, fostering enthusiasm, or establishing a shared vision (Silvia and McGuire 2010).

Scholarly discourse underscores that collaboration ideally fulfills both organizational and network objectives (e.g. Huxham and Vangen 2013). As networks enable the creation of "collaborative advantage" networks create value that could not have been created by individual actors alone (Huxham and Vangen 2010). At the same time, networks should also be geared towards helping its members reach their own organizational goals (Agranoff and McGuire 2001). Effective network management therefore involves a need for member organizations to achieve congruence between both goals (Lemaire 2020).

3.2.1 Mechanisms of leadership in networks

Previous studies have adeptly linked leadership theory to network dynamics, outlining behaviors aiding network effectiveness (Kramer et al.; 2019; Silvia and McGuire 2010; Cepiku and Mastradoscio; 2021). However, much remains unknown about the *mechanisms through which* network leadership operates. More specifically, it is unclear how organizational factors empower or constrain participants in their network leadership, and how this in turn shapes the network as a whole.

3.2.2 Organization-level mechanisms: characteristics of public sector organizations

To grasp how organizational factors are associated with network members' leadership display, we must consider public organizations' distinctive internal features. In essence, public sector entities are situated within bureaucratic and political landscapes (Rainey, 2009; Boyne, 2002), wherein employees navigate complex accountability ties (Boye et al., 2022; Parker and Gould, 1999; Romzek, 2000), balancing divergent political and societal demands (Boye et al., 2022; Pandey and Wright, 2006). These entities juggle loosely defined goals (Boye et al., 2022), aiming for transparent legality alongside efficient problem-solving (Hood, 1995), and reconciling diverse public service expectations (Hood, 1991).

These public sector characteristics may shape individual network members' display of leadership. Firstly, *bureaucratic accountability requirements* of public organizations often require network participants to have a mandate in order to make binding decisions in network

contexts. Secondly, this environment involves a tendency towards formally recording decisions. This could result in network members being more hesitant to make decisions quickly. Yet, this environment heightens the need for leadership beyond formal mandates and positions, as individuals must exhibit leadership for binding choices.

Moreover, the *political environment's* volatility may disrupt prior agreements due to shifting priorities after elections, potentially undermining trust between network members. Consequently, leadership becomes crucial to rebuild trust, though hindered by the continuous need to adhere to political superiors' priorities.

Goal ambiguity in the public sector can foster goal conflict among network members, necessitating relations-oriented leadership to reconcile organizational and collective goals. It also requires network participants to deliberate what constitutes public value and how the network best serves this purpose. A discrepancy between organizational and network goals, paired with a bureaucratic and political-hierarchical environment may hamper network members from demonstrating leadership towards the network's collective goal.

Lastly, public organizations' traits curtail managerial *autonomy*, affecting leadership expression. Grøn et al. (2022) noted public managers' autonomy impacts their leadership capacity.

3.2.3 Organization-level factors: internal management

Alongside internal organizational characteristics specific to public organizations, previous studies on *"boundary spanners"* identify internal management factors which may influence the behavior individuals show in networks (Van Meerkerk and Edelenbos 2017). Although this branch of literature focuses on the participants' advancement of organizational – rather than network – goals, it offers insights into how internal organizational management influences employees' engagement in networking activities.

As previously discussed, public sector goal ambiguity leads to conflicting objectives between networks and participant organizations. Given misaligned or conflicting organizational and network goals, internal management factors within participant organizations gain significance in this study. These factors might encourage network participants to prioritize their organizational goals over network objectives. Conversely, alignment between an organization's goals and the network's could facilitate network participants' leadership display.

Firstly, *organizational support* serves as an internal management factor motivating boundary spanning endeavors. Particularly, top-level backing alleviates uncertainties and stress tied to boundary spanning (Stamper and Johlke, 2003; Arnett and Wittmann, 2014; Van Meerkerk and Edelenbos, 2017). This bolstered support amplifies boundary spanners' confidence and psychological assurance to interact with external actors (Qiu, 2012), making them more amenable to the risks it entails. Hence, it is expected that network participants who are more encouraged by their supervisors to engage in networking activities, are more likely to exhibit leadership in networks.

Secondly, *performance feedback* is positively related to boundary spanning. According to Kahn et al. (1964), role conflict often plagues boundary spanners balancing diverse stakeholder demands with organizational goals. This conflict leads to stress, discontent, and lowered performance (Van Meerkerk and Edelenbos, 2017). Singh (1998) proposes that performance feedback from supervisors can alleviate role conflict's stress and dissatisfaction by clarifying tasks and responsibilities. Translating this into network leadership, participants navigating conflicting demands, like key performance indicators (KPIs) misaligned with network-level goals, might hesitate to exhibit leadership within networks. Conversely, individuals with more congruent internal KPIs and network-level objectives are more likely to display leadership in networks.

Lastly, *team dynamics* and relationships with co-workers enhance or reduce boundary-spanning behavior. If externally oriented activities are encouraged in an employees' team, they are more likely to engage with their environment. If a team agrees on the importance of boundary spanning, individual team members are more likely to engage in these behaviors (Van Meerkerk and Edelenbos 2017). In terms of leadership in networks, this could result in participants who are encouraged by their colleagues of their home organization to participate in the network, exercise more leadership behaviors.

Table 3.1 provides an overview of organizational-level factors of network leadership.

Table 3.1 *Overview of potential organization-level antecedents of network leadership*

Branch of literature	Organization-level antecedents	References
Internal organizational context	Bureaucratic (accountability) requirements	Boye 2022; Parker and Gould 1999; Romzek 2000
	Political environment	Rainey 2009; Boyne 2002
	Goal ambiguity	Boye et al. 2022
	Less autonomy	Grøn et al. 2022
Internal management	Organizational (top-level) support	Stamper and Johlke 2003; Arnett and Wittmann 2014; Van Meerkerk and Edelenbos 2017
	Performance feedback	Kahn 1964; Singh 1998
	Team dynamics	Van Meerkerk and Edelenbos 2017

3.3 Research design and methodology

3.3.1 An embedded case study design

This study involves an embedded case study design of an interorganizational network with 10 regional sub-units situated in The Netherlands. This design allows for the examination of multiple (regional) sub-units within the same context (the national network-structure). In so doing, one can identify patterns, similarities, and differences among the cases, which can help to build a more robust and nuanced understanding of the network being studied (Yin, 2009).

The choice of a single, nationally operating network with multiple sub-units allows for controlled variation within a shared institutional context. By comparing different organizational units operating under the same overarching network structure, the study isolates intra-organizational conditions and how they interact with leadership behavior. This design enhances internal validity by holding constant external variables such as network goals, governance structure, and sectoral environment, while enabling nuanced comparison of how organizational factors shape leadership enactment.

This study includes a network involved in policing in The Netherlands. The Dutch National Police is increasingly embedded in a network of public sector actors, where collaboration and information exchange are becoming essential to address complex challenges in the domains of security, social welfare and mental healthcare (Lakerveld et al. 2019; Mathhys and De Weger 2023). This makes a network involved in these domains particularly relevant

and suitable case for studying leadership in inter-organizational collaboration. The network, which will be referred to here as "Crime Intervention Network" contains several partners in the security domain: public prosecutor's office, national police, victim support group, juvenile offender foundation, parole office, and the domestic violence emergency line.

The aim of this network is to apply the most effective intervention in the case of various types of crimes, including so-called 'high impact crimes' (burglaries, robberies, violent crimes) and minor offences. To this end, these organizations collaborate on a case-by-case basis. When a burglar has been apprehended by the police, all actors are invited to provide additional information about the case. The domestic violence hotline, for instance, may provide additional information about extenuating circumstances of the suspect. The police could add information about the suspect's prior offences and the parole office may provide information about the suspect's rehabilitation trajectory. By combining information and expertise, the parties deliberate about the most appropriate intervention in the case at hand. This could result in a warning, a fine, community service, or prison sentence. Alternatively, the actors could agree about non-judicial measures, such as mediation between suspect and victim.

The network has a nation-wide structure, including multiple managerial levels (see Figure 1). At the national level, a strategic board of top-level managers of the involved actors convene four times a year to discuss strategic priorities of the network. In addition, the network is divided into 10 regional sub-units. Each of these regional sub-units contains one strategic layer of mid-level managers, and one tactical layer of lower-level managers or informal leaders. These tactical managers or informal leaders supervise the frontline officials who deliberate the best solution to a given case. From each regional sub-unit, one member of the tactical layer is chosen to represent the regional sub-unit in an advisory board. The advisory council convenes four times a year and provides feedback and advice to the national strategic board.

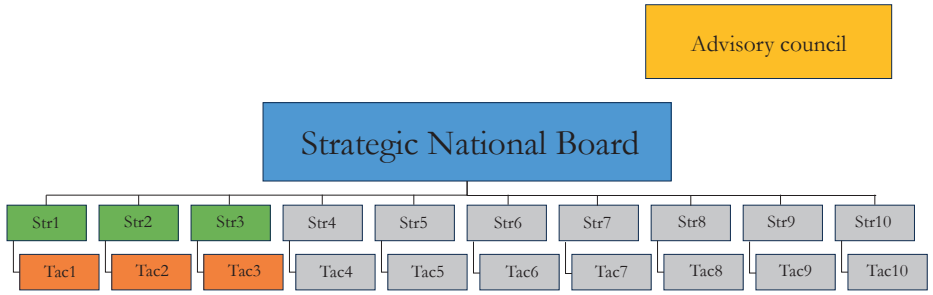

Figure 1: Structure of the Crime Intervention Network

3.3.2 Data collection: semi-structured interviews

Data was collected through 40 semi-structured interviews. The respondents in this study were all current members of the Crime Intervention Network, representing three organizational levels: the operational–tactical level, the regional strategic level, and the national strategic level. The selection aimed to capture the diversity of perspectives within the network. To ensure this, respondents were chosen to reflect a balanced representation across all participating member organizations, allowing insights from each organizational level and sector to be included. The interview protocol (see Appendix B.1) consisted of open-ended questions and probes, and was designed to explore the participants' perspectives and experiences in relation to leadership in their *organization* and in the *network*. Participants were first asked to explain the collective goal on the network. Then, participants were asked whether network members agree on this goal, or whether they show differences in attitudes towards this goal. Thereafter, participants were asked to indicate *who* demonstrates leadership in the organization and/or the network in relation to the collective goal of the network, and whether they could mention any specific *behaviors* that demonstrate leadership.

Respondents were asked to describe specific situations in which they or a fellow network member exhibited a type of leadership behavior. Respondents were also asked to explain whether they themselves exhibit(ed) leadership in the network, and were asked to explain *why* they do or do not use these behaviors. In addition, respondents were asked to describe how their organization either supports or impedes their participation in networks, and how this affects their behavior in the network.

The interviews were conducted either online or at a location of choice and were audio-recorded with the participants' consent. The recordings were then transcribed verbatim. To enhance the validity of the study, the interview guide was reviewed by experts in the

field and pilot tested with one of the network participants before the actual interviews were conducted (Bryman 2016). The transcripts were also reviewed for accuracy and completeness. To enhance the reliability of the study, the same researcher conducted all the interviews, and a second researcher reviewed the transcripts to ensure consistency in the coding process.

3.3.3 Coding protocol and analytical strategy

Interview transcripts were coded through a combination of open and axial coding. The codebook can be found in Table 3.2, p. 62. Open coding was used to break down data into separate codes, after which they were grouped into new categories (Strauss and Corbin 1990). For instance, separate codes were used to distinguish messages related to 'top-level support' or 'performance feedback' as factors influencing the network participants. Consequently, axial coding was used to place different codes into larger categories. For instance, 'top level support' and 'performance feedback' both relate to 'internal management factors.' The same pattern was used to code leadership behavioral categories and underlying behaviors.

After coding leadership behaviors using Yukl's taxonomy and organization-level factors, a second analytic step linked the behaviors to organizational enablers and constraints. Interview segments describing leadership actions were re-examined for accompanying references to organizational conditions—such as performance feedback, top-level support, or political environment. The contextual references were analyzed in relation to the type and frequency of leadership behavior observed. This process allowed for the identification of recurring patterns between organizational context and leadership enactment.

This coding process took several iterations. After these iterations, the authors retrieved five factors which did not fit the descriptions of the existing (deductive) codes, yet formed a particular pattern specifying how an actor was facilitated or held back in demonstrating leadership. In this process, the authors also coded relationships. For instance, the interaction of a particular factor with an individual network member was coded, using 'positive' if the factor encourages leadership, and 'negative' if the factor constrains leadership. Secondly, the outcomes of a particular factor on the level of the network was coded through two emerging codes – codes focusing on the distribution of leadership in the network, and codes focusing on the network's goal orientation.

Table 3.2 *Overview of deductive codes*

Concept	Operationalization	Code
Potential drivers and constraints of network leadership	*Internal management factors*	Top-level support
		Performance feedback
		Team dynamics
	Internal organizational context factors	Political environment
		Bureaucratic (accountability) requirements
		Goal ambiguity
		Autonomy
	Other factors (inductive)	Organization's involvement in network tasks
		Organizational culture
		Organizational structure
		Organizational capacity
Leadership behaviors	*Task-oriented leadership*	Planning
		Dividing tasks
		Monitoring
		Problem solving
	Relations-oriented leadership	Supporting
		Empowering
		Developing skills
		Recognizing achievements
	Change-oriented leadership	Developing a vision
		Sharing and promoting vision
		Encouraging innovation
		Facilitating collective learning
	Externally oriented leadership	Networking
		Representing
		External monitoring
Leadership interaction	Individual level	Positive (encouraging)
		Negative (constraining)
	Network level	Leadership distribution
		Goal orientation

3.4 Findings

Iterations of inductive, deductive, and axial coding resulted in eight organization-level factors which enable or constrain leadership exhibited by network members. These are categorized as *internal management factors*, *structural characteristics factors* and *other factors*. This section describes these factors and explains *how* these factors interact with leadership by individual network members. Consequently, the impact of leadership by individual network members on network leadership as a whole is discussed, specifically referring to leadership concentration and goal orientations. Findings are illustrated using examples of quotes from respondents that were translated from Dutch (original) to English.

3.4.1 Organizational-level enablers and constraints of individual leadership in networks

Internal management factors

Top-level support

The opportunity of an individual representative to exhibit leadership within a network is influenced by the degree of support offered by top-level management in the participant's home organization. In this case study, top-level management of one of the participating organizations gave their employees participating in the Crime Intervention Network strict instructions, as mentioned by respondent 9: *"You speak on behalf of an organization, and if this organization has said 'this is our scope, we won't go any further, stop,' (…) then 'hat's the line you have to follow."* Respondent 4 confirmed this: *"My supervisor always says: 'you represent the Public Prosecution Office, so you have no opinion of your own. What the PP says, you must too.'"*

Consequently, priorities established by top-level management determined the amount of slack its employees participating in the Crime Intervention Network had in either strictly representing their own organizational goals, or moving towards common network goals shared with other members. In the case study, other members of the network mentioned the Public Prosecutor's Office strictly kept to executing their own task in the network, rather than focusing on the collective goal of the network - developing meaningful crime interventions. Respondent 9 quoted the Public Prosecutors Office in the network as follows: *"well, we have to work in accordance with the law and in accordance with the procedures. And when we do that' it's meaningful in itself."*

When top-level managers are unsupportive of collaborative efforts or argue for a focus on internal tasks, the case reveals that network participants of this organization become less invested in network goals, prioritizing their own organization's objectives when interacting with partners. Their leadership behaviors inside the network focuses more on achieving organizational goals, with a reduced consideration for the goals and needs of other organizations. Instead of focusing on the common goal of the Crime Intervention Network, respondent 31 mentioned that the network is at risk of becoming *"a punishment factory."*

Performance feedback

Network participants who need to meet organizational performance indicators are limited in their opportunity to exhibit leadership in networks.

In the Crime Intervention Network, members used key performance indicators (KPIs) to assess organizational performance. These performance indicators did not measure network outcomes, but outputs by individual member organizations. As a consequence, participants of the Crime Intervention Network were influenced to prioritize their own organization's economic reality over network-level outcomes.

This is visible in the following respondent's quote, who argues that KPI's established by the Public Prosecutor's Office to monitor the amount and rapidness of convictions negatively impacts this organizations' commitment to the rights of victims: *"The Public Prosecutor's Office wants to prosecute as soon as possible. The victim is not really in the picture at all. It's about making a deal with the perpetrator quickly. And in cases that have more to do and where the Public Prosecution Service wants fast-track or super-fast-track justice to keep the processing time low (…) the victim has very little time to visualize the damage suffered"* (Respondent 2)

Organizational KPI's also influenced other network members to prioritize their own organizational goals – swift prosecution – over the network's goal of developing a meaningful intervention*: "the police are like that too, they want their plate empty. The clock starts ticking, and then… yes, then: 'oh dear! The interrogation time is almost over!' And that time pressure…. We've got that electronic monitor... It's all on there. If you're overdue, you're 'in the red.' That is due to the time pressure that the DA puts on it, like:"yes, otherwise I have to take him into custody.' Or: 'yes, we have to decide today'"* (Respondent 16).

Concludingly, members would direct their leadership behaviors towards achieving their own organizational goals – prioritizing efficiency – above the common objective of the network as a whole – achieving an effective legal intervention.

Structural characteristics

Political environment

The influence of political priorities on network collaboration appears an important factor to consider as an organization-level enabler or constraint of individual leadership. In the case of the Crime Intervention Network, political pressure resulting from a recent scandal led to a policy shift in which collaboration with other parties was viewed as "additional" or "extra" and not prioritized. Instead, the focus was on improving internal organizational processes and core tasks.

Respondent 9 describes: *"There may have been a pivotal moment…. About six years ago. (…) A case seriously derailed (….) someone who eventually committed a murder which might not have been committed if DNA identification processes were in better order, because then he would have been identified sooner and then we could have arrested him for another -less serious – crime. That has set something in motion within the Public Prosecution Service when it comes to: 'yes, all fun and games - being meaningful and socially involved – but if we are not even able to properly carry out our core processes and execute our criminal justice task, then maybe we shouldn't put on such big pants."*

This shift in priorities poses challenges for network participants representing organizations that prioritize their own core tasks over collaboration with other network partners. In the case of the Crime Intervention Network, this approach led to a decrease of willingness to engage in the collaborative process and a failure to view network activities as a shared responsibility. Concluding, leadership exercised by members who experienced political pressure to focus on organizational priorities, became targeted at reaching these goals rather than the over-arching collective goal of the network.

Bureaucratic accountability requirements

As elements of bureaucratic accountability, funding levels of participating organizations of the Crime Intervention Network were tied to organizational performance. As funding levels for participating organizations were linked to their quantitative outputs, representatives of participating organizations were more inclined to prioritize output maximization in their processes.

In the Crime Intervention Network, this approach negatively impacted the representative's leadership behavior in the network, as they prioritized meeting output requirements over making decisions that benefit network outcomes. Respondent 16 explains how accountability requirements in his own organization influence his work in the network: *"I always say: you get what you aim for. We are a funded organization (…) that receives a subsidy from the Ministry of Justice and Security. If I am asked to account mainly for the things that I have to do myself, in my own column, I will of course manage those."* Respondent 2 explains: *"it was always about the numbers. The influx. And if the influx fell, the Public Prosecution Service became less happy about it."*

Concludingly, similar to the factor of 'performance feedback,' members who experience accountability mechanisms that prioritize particular organizational outputs tend to express leadership in the network that focuses on reaching organizational outputs, rather than focusing on collective objectives.

Other factors

Organization's involvement in network tasks

Respondents indicated that the organization's involvement in network core tasks had an impact on how they viewed their own leadership role in the network. The level of involvement an organization has in network operations can be measured by the time its network participants spend compared to other members and the responsibility they have for network outputs.

Respondent 4 from the Public Prosecutor's Office explains: *"The final decision in each case is always signed on the public prosecutor's behalf, so I think it is quite logical that the PP is the main point of contact (…). The PP is of course ultimately responsible. (…) We are in charge, because we make the decisions as PP."*

In the Crime Intervention Network, network participants whose organization had a larger stake in network operations tended to display more initiative in the network process, while those whose organization was only partially involved were hesitant to provide input and show initiative in network meetings, feeling that their organization is not a crucial partner. As respondent 9 puts it: *"Only the police and the Public Prosecution Service are involved in all cases, so all other organizations always have only a partial interest. Not all cases involve victims, not all cases involve minors, not all cases involve adults. So, the police and the Public Prosecution Service are the ones responsible for investigation and prosecution."*

Respondents described that these participants only take the initiative when the network discusses their specific part of network operations. Moreover, network participants who bear legal responsibility for network-level outputs were more likely to take the initiative in network processes than those who do not. In this case, the public prosecutor's office was legally responsible for all final decisions regarding the penalty of the offender. Due to this responsibility, public prosecutors would be more assertive when discussing cases with partners.

Consequently, members whose organization has a larger (legal) involvement or larger stake in the network process were more likely to display leadership in the network.

Organizational culture and pre-existing expectations regarding leadership

Another factor which emerged from the interviews with network participants entailed pre-existing expectations regarding leadership. In this case, pre-existing expectations regarding leadership were multifaceted. Firstly, some organizations were considered historically "leading" in their domain, such as the public prosecutor's office in the case of the Crime Intervention Network. Secondly, non-profit network partners, like the victim's relief fund in this case, were regarded as less of a leader in their domain, as they were not perceived as professionals: *"But I think it's also a bit due to the image of Victim Support Netherlands. That is sometimes seen as volunteers who provide emotional support"* (Respondent 5).

Expectations regarding different organizational cultures enhanced and reduced leadership expectations of individual network members in the Crime Intervention Network. In this case, the public prosecutor's office and national police were considered leaders due to stereotypical views of employees as more dominant, assertive, and hierarchical. As respondent 5 argues: *"in general I think those who show more leadership are the police and the Public Prosecution Service. They are of course also quickly in that position hierarchically. I do think they are also the ones who are a bit more aware of everything and have a more active role and show a bit more initiative, so to speak, to get things started. If you look at the police, they are… in terms of culture, also more typical people who can speak a bit more dominantly, so to speak, so you notice they can simply express themselves strongly. And showing the leadership in the sense of, well, knowing what they stand for and giving a clear opinion on that."* Respondent 17 confirms: *"giving space to others is not immediately given to a number of officers. It's not in their pores."*

In the case study, pre-existing expectations regarding leadership had two distinct effects. Firstly, participants from organizations that are considered leaders in network arrangements

tended to exhibit more leadership behaviors in the network they operated in. Conversely, network members representing organizations without such a reputation displayed more modest behaviors and did not view themselves as network leaders.

Organizational structure

Organizations with a structure similar to that of the network – in this case, characterized by multiple hierarchical layers, each represented by a manager – were perceived to be more influential in exhibiting leadership than organizations with flat or horizontal structures and self-managing teams. This is because organizations that resemble the network's structure can strategically position similar-level managers within the network. On the other hand, organizations that do not resemble the network structure are unable to delegate a representative with a comparable mandate to the network, with participants representing such organizations often being experienced employees without a formal mandate.

Participants of organizations with a structure resembling that of the network exhibit more leadership behavior, as they are able to make decisions on the basis of a mandate. Conversely, participants of organizations with a different structure exhibit less leadership and may be hesitant to make decisions, as they require consultation with their peers. Thus, organizational structure is an important factor that can impact an individual's opportunity to effectively demonstrate leadership within a network.

As respondent 3 explains: *"The Council for Child Protection don't have real team leaders in their organization, so the MT member of ours at the Crime Intervention Network, is also someone from the shop floor who has very little mandate (…) The Juvenile Offender Foundation employee actually has the same situation, participates in the Management Team, but also works in implementation, with hardly time to do alternative things. The police are a bit more relaxed with a team chief, the Public Prosecution Service is very busy, but does have a lot of hierarchy and therefore room to take responsibility."*

Concludingly, the organizational structure of one's home organization impacts members' opportunity to exhibit leadership, as it determines whether the network member has the mandate required to operate effectively in a network.

Organizational capacity

In the Crime Intervention Network, participants stressed that many member organizations were facing personnel and budgetary constraints. In this case study, this led to member organizations prioritizing their own goals over network goals. As Respondent 25, a member

of the public prosecutor's office explains: *"The economic reality of scarce resources within your own organization…. You cannot let that be overruled by joint views from a partnership (…) Our department is broader than just this network."* As a result, representatives of such organizations were more likely to make decisions that prioritized organizational priorities and negatively impacted the network. They limited their participation in network activities, attend only online meetings, or prioritized addressing operational shortages over network decision-making.

Concludingly, organizational capacity influences a network member's opportunity to showcase leadership, as a surplus of organizational capacity provides network members more space to commit themselves to activities and goals beyond the scope of organizational goals.

3.4.2 The role of organization-level enablers and constraints on leadership in networks

Organization-level enablers and constraints appeared to shape the process of leadership in networks indirectly, as each organization-level factor played a role in shaping the behaviors of individual network members. Since leadership is understood as a process of influencing and inspiring others toward a shared goal or purpose, this section explores how network leadership unfolds in relation to these organizational dynamics. Specifically, it examines how organization-level enablers and constraints shape the focus of network leadership on a shared goal or purpose and how they inform who engages in the leadership process.

Goals: organization-focused and network-focused

This study suggests that organization-level factors may shape the priorities that network participants emphasize in their leadership efforts. This becomes evident in the following quotes, where Respondents 2 and 9 describe how the performance management systems of participating organizations have influenced the ways in which the network approaches and prioritizes certain goals.

> Respondent 2*: "I was talking (…) with a member of police leadership, who was at the Public Prosecution Service at the time, and I asked her: 'do you know what the mission of this network was when it was founded? And she said: 'it was absolutely clear that it was to apply meaningful interventions.' So I responded: 'yes, and we are now only dealing with criminal cases.' Then she said: 'yes, that is how it turned out, but that was absolutely not the intention.'"*

> *Respondent 9: "Already after (…) two years, the passionate substantive society-driven mission changed. (…) After a few years the mission changed towards a business management perspective: 'it must above all be efficient, we need to meet KPI' such as 'fewer summons', because summons take longer and therefore …..' (…) But: are summons an indicator of how meaningful the intervention is or not?"*

In this study, respondents described how, in the process of prioritizing certain organizational goals over network goals, different types of leadership—task-, relations-, change-, or externally oriented behaviors—were used in varying ways to pursue either organizational or network goals. These behaviors are summarized in Table 3.3. p. 72.

The empirical data revealed two distinct forms of task-oriented leadership during decision-making processes: organization-driven and network-driven. In an organization-driven form of decision-making, respondents indicated that the network member initiating the decision did not consult others but made decisions unilaterally. This typically involved informing network members only after the decision had been made and prioritizing one's own organizational processes and regulations as the main motive in the decision. Hence, the actor shows task-oriented behavior in initiating decisions, but its desired goals relate to the goals of their own organization.

In contrast, a network-driven form of decision-making was characterized by collective decision-making, where network members were actively invited to participate in the process of decision-making. Respondents described how this involved drawing up an agenda together, initiating meetings to discuss proposals, and informally contacting other members before making decisions that could impact the network. Additionally, efforts were made by network members to align their own organizational processes with network decisions, rather than the other way around. Hence, in both forms of decision-making task-oriented leadership behaviors were used, yet each reflecting different underlying priorities and goals.

The distinction between leadership behaviors aimed at organizational goals versus network goals also emerged in respondents' descriptions of relations-oriented leadership. A form of relations-oriented leadership aimed at one's own organizational goals was observed when network members made unilateral decisions and informed and apologized afterward if the decision negatively impacted other network partners. In contrast, a form of relations-oriented leadership aimed at network goals involved actively inviting other members to

provide input on a proposal, empowering network members to voice their opinions before expressing one's own stance on the matter.

Similarly, respondents described how change-oriented behaviors were used to prioritize either organizational or network goals. For instance, a network member might emphasize a particular organizational core value to justify a decision. In the case of the Crime Intervention Network, one actor highlighted "efficiency" as a key driver in decision-making. Alternatively, a change-oriented leadership behavior aimed at network goals involved encouraging all network members to collectively weigh the core values of the network and determine which values should be prioritized in a specific decision. Within the Crime Intervention Network, for example, network members described how they framed the core value of the network as "collectively finding meaningful interventions in crime cases."

Lastly, respondents described how externally-oriented behaviors were used to achieve either organizational or network-level goals. For example, some network members unilaterally invited new members or independently organized a lobby to access additional resources, prioritizing their own organizational interests. In contrast, a network-driven approach to externally-oriented behavior involved forming coalitions, collectively lobbying for resources, and jointly deciding on the accession of new network members.

Table 3.3 *Overview of leadership behaviors with an organization-focus versus leadership behaviors with a network-focus*

Type of leadership	Focus: organizational goals	Focus: network goals
Task-oriented	Unilateral decision-making;	Connecting with other members to make decisions together: drawing agenda, scheduling and hosting meetings
	Informing network members, but *after* unilateral decisions have already been made;	Informally contacting other members before making decisions that impact the network
	Prioritizing organizational processes and regulations in decision-making processes	Exploring how organizational processes can be adjusted to align with network decisions
Relations-oriented	Explaining and apologizing for unilateral decisions that affect the network negatively.	Actively encouraging other members to provide input on proposals;
		Empowering other members to voice their concerns
		Asking other members for input before providing own input
Change-oriented	Emphasizing one's own organizational value(s) and prioritizing these in each (collective) decision.	Encouraging other members to reflect on how they perceive the collective goal and values, and collectively decide which values are most important.
Externally oriented	Unilaterally inviting and engaging new network members for the organization's benefit	Creating coalitions to collectively lobby for resources or legislative changes.

Process of leadership: the concentration and distribution of network leadership

In addition to organization-level factors impacting the focus of leadership on either organizational or network goals, this study found that organization-level factors may also be associated with higher or lower levels of leadership concentration.

In the case of the Crime Intervention Network, the organization-level factors impacting individual network members had a *concentrating* effect on network leadership as a whole. This became apparent in the following ways.

Firstly, participants of one organization – the Public Prosecutor–s Office - take the lead; other organizations passively accepted the PP's leadership. This became visible in the

distribution of key positions across the network, with the leader organization holding more significant positions in network meetings. As respondent 2 mentions: *"The Public Prosecution Service has taken up key positions everywhere in 12 years. They chair many consultations, both the Strategic National Board and the Advisory Board. The Advisory Board is chaired by a deputy chief officer. The tactical steering groups in the regional units are often chaired by someone from the Public Prosecution Service…. So, they really left quite a mark on the network as it is now. And I think the other partners let that happen a little bit as well. And there is now a turning point: do we still feel comfortable in this collaboration?"*

Secondly, decisions were made in a more unilateral sense, rather than in collaboration. In this case, the Public Prosecutor's Office did not always consult other partners for input on criminal cases. Certain operational decisions, such as a decision to work from home during the COVID-19 pandemic, were made without consultation. Lastly, the leader organization in this case also blocked decisions that could benefit other organizations. Respondent 1 mentions*: "the Public Prosecution Service can sometimes say:'if we don't like 't, it won't happen. To be kind of dominant in that. It's kind of a trade-off, I think. So that can certainly be a little less sometimes, and at the same time other organizations can be a little more assertive, so to speak."*

The concentration and distribution of network leadership had several effects on the collaborative process. Firstly, distrust and conflict would sometimes arise. When one organization made decisions unilaterally, other organizations became distrustful of the organization as a network partner. This can lead to conflict and tension within the network. Respondent 31 mentions: *"When COVID-19 just arrived, for example, the deputy chairman of the Public Prosecutor's Office simply pulls the plug in the evening after watching the news: "From tomorrow onwards we will work digitally." There are a few that make noise, I am part of that group. But it is as they say."*

3.5 Discussion and conclusion

This study aimed to explore how organization-level mechanisms relate to the leadership behaviors of individual network members, addressing a gap in the academic literature on this topic. Specifically, it examined how organization-level factors shape network participants' opportunities to exhibit leadership behaviors and influence the leadership process in public sector interorganizational networks. The research question guiding this study was: *"How do organization-level factors shape network participants' opportunities to exhibit*

leadership behavior, and how do they relate to the leadership process in public sector interorganizational networks?"

Through a multiple embedded case study within a Dutch Crime Intervention Network, eight organization-level factors were identified as shaping individual leadership behaviors. These included internal management (top-level support, performance feedback), public organization traits (political environment, bureaucratic accountability), and other contextual elements (involvement in network tasks, organizational culture, organizational structure, and operational shortages).

The analysis suggests that the way individuals demonstrate leadership in networks depends on the opportunities their home organization provides for them to exercise such leadership at the network level. This finding aligns with previous academic contributions on the context-dependency of leadership (Van der Hoek and Kuipers, 2022; Yammarino, 2013; Bryman et al., 1996) and highlights that leadership is shaped and constrained by various factors. This reinforces the call for research that considers leadership as an outcome shaped by contextual influences (Bundgaard, Jacobsen, and Jensen, 2021; Chapman et al., 2016; Frederick et al., 2016).

In essence, this study indicates that organizations influence employees' opportunity to demonstrate leadership within the network they participate in. This finding aligns with previous research highlighting the role of organization-level leadership in encouraging employees' boundary-spanning behaviors (Van Meerkerk and Edelenbos, 2018) and the importance of managerial support in facilitating successful collaboration (Klindt, Baadsgaard, and Jørgensen, 2023). Additionally, this study reinforces earlier work on the interconnections between formal and informal leadership (Holm and Fairhurst, 2018), illustrating how formal leadership within organizations can enhance informal leadership within networks.

When organization-level factors prioritize organizational objectives over network objectives, network participants may be more inclined to exhibit leadership behaviors aligned with their own organization's goals. This study illustrates this dynamic by identifying task-, relations-, change-, and externally-oriented leadership behaviors that can serve either organizational or network-level goals. Leadership behaviors with an organizational focus often involve making unilateral decisions, informing network members only after decisions have been made, prioritizing core organizational values in decision-making, and

independently securing resources. In contrast, leadership behaviors with a network focus emphasize collective decision-making, actively seeking input from others before taking a position, jointly weighing key values, and organizing coalitions to collectively attract external resources.

In other words, leadership in networks is shaped by organization-level factors, which may influence individual network participants to exhibit leadership in favor of either organizational or network goals. However, this does not imply a strict 'either-or' scenario where network members must choose between pursuing their own goals or network goals. Ideally, these goals are strategically aligned to prevent such a trade-off. As the central case of this study illustrates, organizations more strategically aligned with network goals may be more likely to exhibit leadership in favor of those goals.

As organizational factors either constrain or enable network leadership by individual members, the overall nature of network leadership is shaped accordingly. At an aggregated level, "network leadership" emerges from the leadership displayed by each individual network participant. Depending on the context, network leadership may become more concentrated or more distributed. This study thus reveals leadership's composite nature from all network member behaviors, by indicating that organization-level factors may lead to various degrees of leadership concentration in the network. In so doing, this finding confirms that, in order to fully understand network leadership, it is crucial to understand the underlying dynamics that enable network members to demonstrate leadership. This is in line with a recent study by Cremers et al. (2023) which also emphasizes the importance of network orchestration by individual organizations.

This study contributes to the boundary spanning literature by revealing how intra-organizational conditions—such as internal accountability regimes, performance pressures, and political salience—act as either enablers or constraints for boundary spanners to exhibit leadership in the context of networks. While boundary spanning has often been studied using the organization as the unit of analysis (Van Meerkerk and Edelenbos 2018; Van Meerkerk and Edelenos 2020), this study uses the network as its starting point, and demonstrates how network members interact with each other as a result of organizational constraints or stimulants. It also advances leadership theory by highlighting how the capacity to enact leadership in networks is contingent on organizational context. These insights confirm the call for greater attention to the context in which leadership takes shape (Van der Hoek and Kuipers, 2022; Yammarino, 2013).

Additionally, this section concludes with the following observation. The literature identifies three factors—team dynamics in the home organization, goal ambiguity, and (reduced) autonomy—that did not surface in this case study. Based on the theoretical framework, team dynamics were expected to shape boundary spanners' ability to demonstrate leadership. However, this expectation was not supported by the findings. One possible explanation is that the network examined in this study was an established and mandated network, meaning that participation was required rather than voluntary. As a result, team dynamics within the home organization may have played a less significant role.

Goal ambiguity and reduced autonomy did emerge in participants' experiences of leadership opportunities. However, rather than functioning as standalone organizational factors, these aspects were shaped by other elements, such as top-level support, performance feedback, political context, and accountability requirements. These factors contributed to goal ambiguity and constrained autonomy among network participants. Given the specific nature of this network, it remains uncertain whether team dynamics generally shape leadership opportunities in interorganizational settings. Future research could explore whether team dynamics play a more significant role in other types of networks.

One limitation of this study is that it is confined to The Netherlands and one network (Crime Intervention Network), although its identified mechanisms are broadly applicable. Future research could explore organizational mechanisms in other national contexts and other sectors.

Secondly, this study was based on interviews with network members. This could lead to potential (self-reporting) bias. This limitation, however, was countered through a verification of observations through additional interviews with other network members. Lastly, longitudinal observations were limited due to the study's nature, ignoring network life cycle stages' impact on organization-level enablers and constraints. An opportunity for future research could be to follow a network through its entire lifecycle to verify whether organization-level enablers and constraints have different effects at different stages of a network's existence.

Besides these recommendations to counter the limitations of this study, we also identify additional avenues for future research. Firstly, future research could study the *effects*, rather than determinants, of leadership within network contexts. Studying the use and outcomes of leadership behaviors can provide useful insights into the effectiveness of

networks in achieving network goals. Secondly, intervention studies could explore how network members can become more aware of the organization-level factors influencing their behavior in networks. As this study demonstrated that organization-level factors may encourage or hinder network leadership, intervention studies that help participants become more aware of these factors is a first step in helping organizations to increase their alignment with network goals.

Concludingly, this study demonstrates the interplay between organization-level factors and leadership behaviors individual members exhibit in networks to attain organizational and network goals. In so doing, it connects with earlier calls to study the potential interconnections between leadership and contextual factors (Akerboom, Groeneveld and Kuipers 2024). More specifically, this study demonstrates that organization-level factors can *hinder* network members in exhibiting leadership for the benefit of the network, and prioritize organizational goals. This is striking, as this study indicates that, in order for networks to meet the goals they were established to pursue, organizations should strategically align themselves to the networks in which they participate.

Hence, this study also provides relevant insights for the practice of network collaboration in the public sector. As leadership in networks and member organizations is interlinked, public organizations should pay attention to how the organizational environment may enable or hinder collaborative efforts. Given the rise in inter-organizational collaboration over the past decades, it is vital that public sector organizations structure themselves in such a way that their employees are facilitated in creating public value that stretches beyond organizational goals. Public organizations should take networks seriously and invest in aligning their organization with the goals of the networks in which they participate in order to achieve both their own goals and collective goals. This means taking seriously top-level leadership, feedback through performance management systems – which are factors public organizations do have control over – and see how these could affect network participation. By taking these aspects more seriously, organizations can tackle organizational barriers that hinder their employees from exhibiting leadership in networks or even turn them into enablers of leadership in networks.

The findings also carry implications for network managers or coordinators. Leadership in networks cannot be assumed to emerge organically; it requires awareness of the organizational conditions in which participants are embedded. Network managers should consider how internal factors—such as managerial support, accountability expectations,

and organizational capacity—either enable or inhibit leadership contributions by all members. When starting a network or adding new network members, it is important to engage not only the individuals representing each organization but also their internal leadership, to align incentives and ensure that network engagement is supported rather than obstructed at the organizational level.

For practitioners operating in networks, this study demonstrates how leadership towards organizational goals and leadership towards network goals manifests itself in specific behaviors. Practitioners may use these behaviors themselves, or observe these behaviors in other network members and assess the consequences these behaviors may have for the achievement of organizational and collective goals.