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## **Analyzing a Decade of Management and Leadership Research Related to Co-creation and Co-production**

*A semi-structured literature review*

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# **Analyzing a Decade of Management and Leadership Research Related to Co-creation and Co-production: A semi-structured literature review**

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## **Abstract**

Research focusing on managerial perspectives on organizations that co-produce and co-create is limited, and what is published calls for more. The study's research question is: *What can we learn from research on management and leadership of public organizations that co-produce public value, and which tendencies emerge as avenues for future research?* A semi-structured literature review is used to identify and analyze current trends and tendencies. The study contributes with a synthesis of existing research and a research agenda. For practitioners the study points to five critical implications that can be used to inform managerial practices related to co-creation and co-production.

## **Keywords**

Co-production; Co-creation; Management; Leadership; Literature Review; Public Value

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# **Analyzing a Decade of Management and Leadership Research Related to Co-creation and Co-production: A semi-structured literature review**

With the introduction of collaborative and New Public Governance (NPG) in the Western world and especially in Northern Europe (OECD 2011), we have been witnessing many changes in roles and responsibilities for citizens, and for the employees and managers of public sector organizations (Osborne et al. 2013; Brandsen and Honingh 2013; Bovaird and Loeffler 2015; Steen and Tuurnas 2018). What has occurred in practice is that NPG has been adopted by public organizations and this governance ideal has been merged with New Public Management (NPM) and Traditional Public Administration (TPA). This creates all sorts of local managerial ‘creatures’ including hybrid roles that are recognized by multiple types of dual pressure stemming from the tension of having a hybrid governance model (Mortensen et al. 2021). One of the characteristics of NPG is the adoption and use of co-production and co-creation as a (new) way of working in the public sector (Brandsen and Honingh 2016). Some bearing arguments for this introduction is e.g., that collaboration deepens democracy by emphasizing inclusivity of all members of society (Fung and Wright, 2001) and that collaboration has potential to create public value (Moore, 1997; Brown and Head 2018) i.e., by increasing efficiency for the public sector organization, and creating better services from the point of view of citizens/users. Hence the introduction is expected to be a driver for public sector innovation (Voorberg et al. 2017; Brix et al. 2020). While the ongoing change in – and adaptations to governance models is getting attention research wise from a macro perspective (e.g., Hodgkinson et al. 2017; Hambleton 2019; Strockosch and Osborne 2020) and on concrete approaches to co-produce with citizens (e.g. Suutari et al. 2021; Campanale et al. 2021; McMullin 2022), we do not know much about the organizational and managerial influences and

implications that the adoption of NPG and co-creation/co-production has created to political leaders and managers in public sector organizations (e.g. Sicilia et al. 2016; Ongaro et al. 2021; Torfing et al. 2021). What we do know, however, is that the traditional view of management and leadership in the representative democracy used during NPM are no longer adequate to harvest the fruits of NPG (Torfing et al. 2019; Sørensen et al. 2021). The logic is that the changes we are witnessing require that politicians reposition themselves to lead local communities rather than primarily focusing on controlling their organization, and this puts extra pressure on the administrative leaders to handle (Bentzen et al. 2020; Mortensen et al. 2020).

For this reason, we are interested in framing ‘the management and leadership of public organizations that co-produce’ as a field of research, and to do this we first need to understand and describe what we can learn from the previous work of other scholars. The research question guiding our study is: *What can we learn from research on management and leadership of public organizations that co-produce, and which tendencies emerge as avenues for future research?* The implication of conducting this study is that it will allow us to produce a thematic development of the subject at hand, indicate a state-of-the-art, and pinpoint a research agenda for future studies (Paul and Criado 2020; Steiner et al. 2023).

### ***Framing key concepts***

#### *Co-production and co-creation*

In the literature, the terms co-production and co-creation are used sometimes synonymously and other times as different ways to articulate general collaboration and ways to engage citizens and users in the design, planning and production of public services (Voorberg et al. 2015; Bovaird and Loeffler 2015; Steiner et al. 2023). Brandsen and Honingh (2018) among others make the distinction between co-creation and co-production, where co-creation is about defining services on a strategic level and co-production is about the actual implementation of the service (Ansell and Torfing 2021; Osborne et al. 2022). We also see differences between co-

production as a relationship between one public sector organization and users/citizens (e.g., Mortensen 2020), and co-production as a collaboration between multiple organizations and users/citizens (e.g., McMullin 2023). In our study we use co-production as the general label in respect of the origin of the research tradition (Ostrom 1996), which implies that co-production when used as a concept in the paper also can stem from research utilizing the label co-creation. Our logic is that organizations that co-produce has to lead and managed no matter if the actual work takes shape as co-creation, co-production or in a portfolio of a mix of these (Mortensen et al. 2023). Therefore, with the purpose of this paper we follow the line of thinking of e.g. Sicilia et al. (2016) and adopt an inclusive definition.

## **Materials and Methods**

Because the field of co-production can be characterized more as a multiverse of studies with varied definitions than a monodisciplinary area of inquiry with one or few clear definitions (Steinar et al. 2023), it is difficult to conduct a classic systematic literature review. Instead, we follow the recommendation of Snyder 2019 and apply a semi-systematic literature review as our research strategy. A semi-structured literature review is relevant to use for “(...) *topics that have been conceptualized differently and studied by various groups of researchers within diverse disciplines that hinder a full systematic review process.*” (Snyder, 2019, 335). This approach hence enables us to identify and examine both disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives on the management and leadership of public organizations that co-produce and consequently to map the phenomena as a field of research.

### ***Data collection***

We started by checking if any recent literature reviews were published related to our paper’s topic, and we did not find any in English, Danish or Norwegian. This implies that a review concerning our paper’s topic can be considered both relevant and novel (Paul and Criado 2020).

Although our study is a semi-systematic literature review which does not necessitate a strict step-by-step methodology (Snyder 2019), we are inspired by Anand and Brix (2022) and Tranfield *et al.*'s (2003) work which gives us five overall process steps to follow as methodology. The recommendations are as follows: 1) identify databases, 2) select keywords/labels, 3) identify inclusion and exclusion criteria, 4) analyze content of included material, and 5) synthesize and interpret the results.

#### *Database selection and search strategy*

Inspired by Anand et al. (2021) we selected Scopus and Google Scholar as our main databases, and we decided to include the database Primo which could provide information about peer reviewed publications written in Danish and Norwegian (the authors' mother tongues). The preliminary keywords we identified that could serve as foundation for our review were: co-production, co-creation, management, leadership, governance, and public sector. Based on these keywords we created following search string: TITLE-ABS-KEY ( "co-creat\*" OR "co-produc\*" AND ("management" OR "leader\*" OR "managing" ) AND ( "public AND sector" OR "gover\*" )) AND PUBYEAR > 2010 AND PUBYEAR < 2024. A total of 1306 journal publications were identified, and we began to sort the publications following inclusion and exclusion criteria.

#### *Inclusion and exclusion process*

To be included in the study each publication should be about the management and/or leadership of public organizations that co-produce. These public organizations could be e.g., local governments and municipalities. To find such studies we applied following exclusion logic. First, we were interested in perspectives from social science and humanities, so we excluded literature that did not stem from these stances. This led to 870 relevant publications. Then we excluded non-peer reviewed publications and publications that were not authored in either English, Norwegian or Danish. This led to a total of 757 research-based journal articles, books,

and book chapters. We then excluded studies that reported on the management and/or leadership of *co-production processes* (methodologies and approaches to co-production), and co-production in the private sector (movies, music, etc.) since these themes do not relate to the theme of our study, and we also excluded publications stemming from non-western cultures. This led to a total of 164 relevant publications. We did a preliminary sorting of these 164 publications by use of a MS Excel. This sorting was done by reading the abstracts of the publications using color-coding to indicate the thematic fit to our study. Green implied that the publication fitted the inclusion criteria, yellow that the theme was adjacent to the inclusion criteria, and red color representing publications beyond the scope. An example of a directly included ‘green publication’ was Bentzen *et al.* (2020) because it fits within our scope. An example of a ‘yellow publication’ was Hölscher *et al.* (2019) because it is about cross-sector management beyond the public organization. An example of a red publication was Barraket and Loosemore (2018), because their study did not include explicit perspectives on the public organization, but on social enterprises and the private sector. A general ‘problem’ was that the label ‘management’ was present in many abstracts, but in the context of ‘New Public Management’, and not ‘management’ as a theoretical or empirical theme. Hence, this process allowed us to removed studies that used the keyword/labels applied in our search, but which did not have the theme of leadership and management of public organizations that co-produce as an actual theme. This process led to the identification of 49 relevant sources which represent the foundation for our analysis and interpretation (Snyder 2019; Anand *et al.* 2020).

A general critique to our inclusion/exclusion process is necessary. The ideal of identifying and finding all relevant publications related to the purpose of this study is easier done in theory than in practice (Benders *et al.* 2007). Especially with an ill-defined – however important – theme as ‘leadership and management related to public organizations that co-produce’. Our logic is that the theme has not yet been in ‘fashion’, and therefore we might not find important

studies because the keywords/labels related to leadership and management have not been applied explicitly in the publications although the studies could be about leadership and management. In addition, because we are only proficient in English and Danish languages, we will most likely miss out on many studies that are published in national languages (Anand and Brix 2022) such as Dutch, German, and Italian and where we know that co-production and co-creation are part of the management of public sector organizations.

#### *A meso level perspective*

Inspired by van Gestel et al. (2023) we distinguish between the macro, meso and micro levels of management in public sector to narrow in on the themes relevant to our study. The macro level represents the national level model where we find the ideal types of Traditional Public Administration, New Public Management and New Public Governance, or hybrids hereof (Torfing et al. 2019). The strategic and operational management of organizations (and networks) are at the meso level, and finally the micro level represents where the public sector professional meets each other and/or the citizen in the act of co-production. The logic is that all three levels are intertwined and hence influence one another, both with barriers and opportunities. This perspective is highlighted by van Gestel et al. (2023, p. 18): “*Professionals sometimes feel stuck in their multiple roles because they have to deliver client-oriented services (NPG) that fit within legal frameworks (TPA), and also are cost-effective and efficient (NPM).*” For the purpose of this review, we are particularly interested in the meso level of public management for co-production, where the actual roles of both political leaders and public sector managers can be found (e.g. Sicilia et al. 2019). This level represents more or less a black box from a research perspective (Sørensen et al. 2021), and a critical limitation to our study is hence to investigate and explore what we can learn about the current state-of-the-art. The argument is that the macro level is becoming well discussed and understood (e.g. Liddle 2017; Osborne et



al. 2018; Pestoff 2019) and that the micro level is on its way (Mortensen et al. 2020; Suutari et al. 2021; McMullin 2023).

### *Data analysis*

We use inductive content analysis (Elo and Kyngäs 2008) to identify current trends and themes in the literature. After having read the included papers and got an idea of the content at hand, we decided to begin coding the content in two different tables using MS Word. One table used for coding was divided into different managerial levels in the leadership chain ranging from political leaders to team leaders. This table was selected because we found examples in the literature on the reflection of different managerial roles at different levels, and therefore this was selected as an appropriate coding choice to find (new) tendencies across the papers. We also decided to utilize another table to divide the content into aspects of 1) culture, 2) structure and 3) tasks/processes. These categories were also articulated explicitly across a range of the papers, and therefore we were interested in finding (new) tendencies here as well.

Before commencing the full-scale coding, the research team selected 3 papers and coded the content of each paper into the two tables in two workshops. The team had read the papers beforehand, and the workshops were used to discuss if and how content should be coded – this to increase intercoder reliability (Krogstrup and Brix 2019).

When the research team was approximately halfway through the coding we began to see a new tendency in the literature. Therefore, we decided to add a third table to our coding that could encompass content on both enabling and hindering variables related to the management of organizations that co-produce. The papers that had been coded were revisited to identify potential content for the new, third table, and hereafter the coding process was finalized.

## Results

In the following we start by first presenting the results related to the role of managers and leaders in public organizations that co-produce. Afterwards, we unravel the findings related to intra- and interorganizational conditions that enable co-production.

### *Roles of managers and leaders in organizations that co-produce*

When analyzing the literature, we discovered that scholarly findings and recommendations frequently are directed towards leadership and management as general phenomena, and much lesser towards specific levels of management or types of management. This section starts by presenting the findings related to general management and leadership. Hereafter we present the nuances related to specific roles at different managerial levels.

The general message that repeats itself in the included papers is that a new kind of leadership is needed to manage organizations that co-produce. Brown and Head (2018, 252) e.g., state that ‘ (...) *if new ways of working are to succeed, the “logics” which are actively against the new ways must be weakened.*’ Pedersen and Tangkjær (2013, 33-34) stress that ‘ (...) *public welfare organizations have to concern themselves with both complex and cross-disciplinary challenges, which again require new crucial leadership skills and capabilities.*’, and in line with this, Crosby et al. (2017) point to the fact that the solution to wicked problems is not necessarily predicated on consensus, but the opportunities that lie in different views and priorities can help shape better ideas and even better solutions for all parties to create public value. Hence, findings in current literature agree that this is not an easy task to make to transition to managing organizations that co-produce, and that we do not know much about it (e.g., Sicilia et al. 2019). One of the recommendations and ways forward we find is to rethink the leadership role. Pedersen and Tangkjær (2013, 34) argue that ‘ (...) *public welfare leaders need to move beyond formal authority and involve and mobilize influence, based on different forms of*

*argument, types of evidence and processes of legitimately shared decision making.*' . In addition, these authors stress that public managers have a role in inspiring their colleagues with creative practices and solutions to co-production which hence represents a clear step away from the role of controlling known from NPM. The point is that new roles are needed since the power stemming from formal hierarchical positions or 'important roles' that are ascribed to public managers does not work the same way in a NPG paradigm compared to the NPM paradigm (see also, Vedeld, 2022). Pedersen and Trangkjær (2013, 35) stress that:

Authority and legitimacy in the involving state are no longer distributed through hierarchies and formal organizational forums, but are to a much larger degree a result of an ability to act, create and relate own organizational effort to complex contexts of politics, strategies, ambiguities and counterproductive expectations from politicians, citizens, employees, partners, enterprises, medias, and so on.

In our analysis we identified both managerial enablers and inhibitors related to organizations that co-produce that point to specific focus areas. In table 1 we summarize managerial inhibitors.

### *Managerial inhibitors*

A key theme that emerges from table 1 is that lack of a clear strategy for co-production creates confusion about why co-production matters and when co-production is an appropriate response (see also Krogstrup and Brix, 2019). The lack of ability (or initiative) to operationalize the goals of co-production initiatives also stands out as a theme that hinders successful implementation (Aschoff and Vogel 2018) which can also inhibit that the learning stemming from co-production can be created and used in the organization to make co-production more sustainable (Loeffler and Bovaird 2012; McMullin 2023).

**Table 1: Managerial inhibitors**

<b>Inhibitors</b>	<b>References</b>
Lack of strategic goals with co-production in the organization	Agger and Tortzen (2023)
Silo-structures that inhibit collaboration within organization, e.g. because of legislation (GDPR)	Agger and Tortzen (2023)
Lack of incentives to co-produce	Loeffler and Bovaird (2012) Agger and Tortzen (2023)
Lack of clear (or the use of arbitrary) goals for evaluation	Aschoff and Vogel (2018)
Paradoxical conflicts (competing values)	Brown and Head (2018)
Conflicting or competing incentives between professional co-producers from different organizations (or departments)	Connolly et al. (2023)
Avoid collaborative inertia by relying on “traditional” management view that build on formal power based on hierarchy	Crosby et al. (2017)
Lack of knowledge on what co-production is	Loeffler and Bovaird (2012)
Over-bureaucratic regulations	Loeffler and Bovaird (2012)
Lack of organizational learning initiatives / structures	Loeffler and Bovaird (2012)
Managers sending subordinates to important meetings can slow down co-production processes because of lack of decision power on the organizations behalf	Smith (2020)
Lock-in on traditional roles from the representative democracy where politicians decide on behalf of the public and administrators execute decision – in politics it is natural to keep and maintain power, not to share it; and in traditional administration information flows go vertically or horizontally, not laterally	Sørensen et al. (2021)

**Source:** Authors’ own development

We also find that the ‘co’ of co-production is difficult if the organizational context is not supportive. Connolly et al. (2017) identify that competing incentives hinder co-producers in collaborating, Agger and Tortzen (2023) stress that lack of incentives hinders co-production initiatives, and Crosby et al. (2017) and Sørensen et al. (2021) stress that silo structures and silo thinking and the use of ‘traditional management roles’ based on hierarchy and formal power fall short in ‘equal partnerships’. To turn these indicators into recommendations, we can learn from the literature that it is important that there is a clear strategy for co-production, a clear strategy for how to operationalize and evaluate the outputs and outcomes of co-production, and strategies for how to enable collaboration across administrative and organizational boundaries.

### *Managerial enablers*

The managerial enablers found are summarized in table 2. One of the first themes that emerge as managerial enabler is resources. Sørensen et al. (2021) stress the importance of having organizational capabilities for co-production that can be accessed, mobilized and shaped, and Loeffler and Bovaird (2020) point to the same theme stating that it takes both time and resources to enable sustainable co-production practices (see also Jäppinen 2015). Another theme that stands out is the importance of managers recognizing that co-production practices can take different forms in different or even same contexts (Steiner et al. 2023). Agger and Tortzen (2023) stress that it is important that managers allow for flexibility in ways of working and supporting co-production in local contexts, and Ferlie (2021) echo this theme.

**Table 2: Managerial Enablers**

<b>Enablers</b>	<b>References</b>
Allocation of time and resources for co-production	Loeffler and Bovaird (2012)
Managers allow flexibility to ways of working	Agger and Tortzen (2023)
Giving front-line co-producers clear mandates for what they can and cannot decide and explicit preconditions for the collaboration	Agger and Tortzen (2023)
Co-producing actors should align work done to cross-fertilize and help each other instead of working (or acting) independently in silos	Connolly et al. (2023)
Focus on collaborative productivity towards value creation	Henson (2019)
Having institutional designs that foster and provide stabilizing frameworks for collaboration	Hofstad et al. (2022) Ongaro et al. (2021)
A dedicated focus on change management towards co-creation and co-production; organizations must learn to co-produce before they can really harvest the fruits of co-production	Jäppinen (2015)
Promote community / user / citizen participation	Ongaro et al. (2021)
Investigate which decisions that can be delegated to who	Ongaro et al. (2021)
Provide understandable and correct information to different stakeholders	Ongaro et al. (2021)
Support decisions made stemming from co-production that has been created ‘within the frame’	Ongaro et al. (2021)
Organizational capabilities that can be accessed, mobilized and shaped	Sørensen et al. (2021)
Building leadership capacity through leadership alliances or distributed leadership structures with different actors, both internal and external	Sørensen et al. (2021)

Focus on long-term effectiveness and efficiency with room for experimentation instead of short-term ‘zero-error’ culture	Torfinng et al. (2019)
Awareness and acceptance of different ways of working in the organization on different levels to enable co-production	Ferlie (2021)
There is a need for multiple styles of leadership in organizations that co-produce and it is important that leaders from different organizations acknowledge the need for ‘collaborative productivity’ instead of the productivity of one’s own organization as the primary	Henson (2019)
It is important that there is a value focus in the organization and an understanding of what’s valuable to the citizens/users of to create the most effective and efficient citizen-oriented services	Magno and Cassia (2015)
Being able to ‘let go of control’ and ‘focus on the importance of equal partnerships’ is becoming important managerial abilities	Tortzen (2017)

**Source:** Authors’ own development

Henson (2019) even argue that one organization may need different styles of leadership and that the concrete type of leadership needed depends on the actual co-production that is taking place in different projects and portfolios (see also Steiner et al. 2022; Torfinng et al. 2019).

One of the issues found in the literature is that some managers find it hard to let go of the control that they are used to have because of the requirement/expectation stemming from the ‘equal partnerships’ that often is associated with co-production (Tortzen, 2017). This goes to the next theme that emerges in table 2: collaboration towards impact. Magno and Cassia (2015) argue that it is important that staff and managers in public organizations in general are aware of what is valuable to the users and citizens.

The promotion of public value and a dedicated managerial focus on value creation hence seems like an important theme that enable successful co-production (Strokosch and Osborne 2012; Henson 2019; Ongaro et al. 2021). Pedersen and Tangkjær (2013) stress that it is important that public sector managers recalibrate their strategic orientation from having a ‘first-order’ view on strategy work (inside out) and turn towards a ‘second-order’ view, where co-producers, both collaborating organizations and citizens/users in collaboration define what is important (outside in). Ongaro et al. (2021) states in this regard that it is important that managers

from all organizations should support the decisions made in diverse co-production projects as long as the decisions lie within the frame of what is agreed upon. Connolly et al. (2023) also emphasizes this systemic view on the managerial role of co-production, and they highlight the importance of the co-producers seek to cross-fertilize and help each other reaching the common goals instead of working from one's one silo outwards.

Henson (2019) utilizes the concept of collaborative productivity to articulate the need for collaborators while searching for effectiveness and efficiency to managing co-production across administrative and organizational boundaries. For collaborative productivity to work it is important that organizational actors have been granted clear mandates for what they can and cannot do/agree on, and that the preconditions for collaboration are explicitly articulated by the management team (Ongaro et al. 2021; Agger and Tortzen 2023). The difficulty in this regard is that it will take time to build the capacity to have well-functioning set-ups for co-production across organizational boundaries (Brix et al. 2020) and that managers on the one hand need to recognize the need for both inter- and intraorganizational learning to make the best possible contextual conditions for co-production to thrive and be sustainable (Jäppinen 2015; Sørensen et al. 2021). To paraphrase Laubek (2024, 273) *'it sometimes seems that organizations who collaborate act like children throwing balls over the fence to each other; they do not know if anyone catches the ball or what happens to it, but suddenly the ball comes right back at you.'* On the other hand, managers need to acknowledge that it takes time to change the culture from short term gains and a 'zero error culture' towards a more experimenting, long-term view on creating outputs and outcomes that matters (Torfing et al. 2019). Providing stable context and frameworks for co-production and having the courage as managers to 'work slow to work fast' – also in times of co-production fatigue – is an important managerial task (Hofstad et al. 2020; Ongaro et al. 2021; Laubek 2024).

### *An emerging theme: Thinking and acting evaluatively*

Another perspective in this regard is the notion of downward accountability (Brown and Head 2018). With the introduction of NPG and co-production, accountability is not only about summative evaluations – accountability has become a formative evaluation task related to evaluating ‘how things are going and ‘what works well and less well’ as seen from both the users/citizen perspective and the perspective of the organizational co-producers (Laubek 2024; Krogstrup 2024). The logic is that ‘thinking and acting’ evaluatively at the same time is argued to better enable the expected outcomes of co-production (Durose et al. 2017; Ferlie 2019; Brix et al. 2020). Such an evaluative approach to co-production, where evaluations are used formatively to create new knowledge for learning, is hence proposed as an important managerial role (Krogstrup and Mortensen 2021). This not only goes for the concrete co-production activities/projects but also for the portfolio of co-production projects to enable the best organizational conditions to enable public value (Smith 2021; Mortensen et al. 2023). The current problem is that evaluations often are used arbitrary which e.g., leads to frustration and a feeling of people wasting their time (Aschoff and Vogel 2018; Laubek 2024). Hence, the literature points to a need for practicing managers and administrators to be trained 1) in the processes of identifying ‘what’s valuable’, and the 2) ability to engage in formative evaluation, so they can 3) align co-production activities and priorities with the organization’s mission and goals (Ferlie 2019; Henson 2019; Brix et al. 2020). In addition to this, a key role of public managers is to keep focus on the value of co-production related to the outcomes that the citizens and users desire, also during times where co-production fatigue emerges (Torfing et al. 2019).

### *Specific roles related to different managerial levels*

Although the literature we analyzed has findings pointing to general management and leadership roles, we also identified themes that relate more to specific managerial levels. To



distinguish between different levels, we divide them into 1) political leadership, 2) strategic leadership, 3) tactical leadership and 4) operational leadership. See table 3.

**Table 3:** Examples of different roles and responsibilities

LEVEL	EXAMPLES OF ROLES	REFERENCES
<b>Political leadership</b>	Setting agendas and making policies that build on the premise of co-production; mobilize support in communities/within subject areas (meta-governance); revisit and potentially alter political decisions made in past that can hinder co-production (focus on inclusive reframing of old problems); focus on long-term outcomes more than short-term results (paradox in accountability)	Bentzen et al. (2020) Vedeld (2022) Brown and Head (2018) Torfing et al. (2019) Agger and Tortzen (2023) Van Gestel et al. (2023)
	<i>Grey zone – what happens here?</i>	
<b>Strategic leadership</b>	The ability to articulate if and how co-production is part of the organizations strategy and modus operandi; lead the strategic transition towards co-production; Enable collaboration across administrative and organizational boundaries; decentralize decision mandates where clear boundaries and/or criteria can be given to foster responsiveness	Brix et al. (2020) Ongaro et al. (2021) Van Gestel et al. (2023) Sicilia et al. (2019) Sørensen et al. (2021)
	<i>Grey zone – what happens here?</i>	
<b>Tactical leadership</b>	Act as boundary spanners; create processes and structures that are flexible and emphasize organizational learning; the ability to understand and navigate within contexts of distributed and unequal power relationships;	Aschoff and Vogel (2018) Frimann et al. (2023) Ferlie (2021) Sicilia et al. (2016) Connolly et al. (2023)
	<i>Grey zone – what happens here?</i>	
<b>Operational leadership</b>	Ensuring equal opportunities for user/citizen representation (avoid dark side of co-production); secure that actual co-production adhere to rules; helping project managers enable co-production processes; provide opportunity to competence development for co-production; create opportunities for organizational learning from co-production projects; build formative evaluation practices	Henson (2019) Campanale et al. (2021) Connolly et al. (2023) Frimann et al. (2023) Loeffler and Bovaird (2020) Van Gestel et al. (2023)
	<i>Grey zone – what happens here?</i>	
<b>Micro level</b>	<i>Co-production processes and practices</i>	Suutari et al. (2020)

**Source:** Authors' own elaboration

### *Political leadership*

Agger and Tortzen (2023) stress that political anchoring of co-production is important to (better) ensure commitment throughout the municipal steering chain. In addition to this, the

same authors propose that it would be beneficial to guide and educate political leaders in ‘what co-production is’ and ‘how co-production is expected to work to create outcomes’ to make sure that the politicians’ assumptions about the way that co-production work is in line with reality (see also Campanale et al. 2021).

This perspective is important to avoid political leaders making decisions and formulating policies that fit with the NPM way of working and hence from the beginning unintentionally undermine that co-production can be used to implement the new policy (Agger and Tortzen 2023). In line with this, Brown and Head (2018, 260) state that ‘(...) *policies have to be developed that do not unintentionally legitimize reversion to the existing organizational culture and practices.*’ Hence, the existence of legal frameworks and how politicians set boundaries of what can be done and what cannot be done is important background information to frame what that is possible and not (Loeffler and Bovaird 2020). If co-production is to become the modus operandi of public organizations, it would require a co-production strategy that is recognized and emphasized by politicians and managers as well as it would require capabilities for managing organizations that co-produce to make the needed turn in governance model in practice and not only in theory (Campanale et al. 2021; Hofstad et al. 2022; Mortensen et al. 2023).

### *Strategic leadership*

An important aspect that emerges from our review of the literature is the strategic management of co-production. While the importance of strategic management is not new to public sector organizations (e.g. Bryson et al. 2006; Holmgren and Nussler 2020), it has seldom been studied from the perspective of co-creation and co-production (Ongaro et al. 2021; van Gestel et al. 2023; Sicilia et al. 2019). Pedersen and Tangkjær (2013) stress that a top executives and politicians should focus primarily on ‘second-order strategies’ that take the systems picture into

account, instead of spending all energy on the organizations own (individual) first-order strategy. In other words, the executive and political level should prioritize their focus on social strategies and strategies for public value to meet the social and ecological complexities in society and local communities instead of having a more ‘traditional’ and/or ‘classical’ approach to strategic management (Brix and Antonsen 2022).

Sørensen et al. (2021) introduce the Public Value Governance Triangle as a framework for public leadership of co-creating organizations. They stress that co-creative leadership can work best if there is 1) an authorizing environment that cut across administrative and organizational boundaries including citizens and users, 2) organizational capabilities to co-create, and 3) a common focus on public value outcomes. Sørensen et al. define co-creating leadership as ‘(...) a strategic effort to build leadership capacity and invest in the promotion of virtuous circles among authorization, capacity-building and public value outcomes through the extensive use of co-creation.’ (Sørensen et al. 2021, 280). Ongaro et al. 2021 discuss how different ‘schools of thought’ from the strategic management literature relate to co-production which are 1) the public value school, 2) the design and planning school, and 3) the cultural school. In the ‘public value school’ public sector managers are seen as ‘stewards of public value’ and here focus is on creating ‘impact on public needs’. To enable this an important role for public managers is to have a sharp orientation on the outcomes that are desired (the target of the public value) and to use this orientation e.g., to prioritize resources and paces of work. In the ‘design and planning school’ focus is on trying to create and develop a plan for co-creation initiatives that both have exploitation (single loop learning) and exploration (innovation / double loop learning) orientations to meet the requirements of both the public organization and the users/citizens. In the ‘cultural school’ the premise is that co-production is a core value to the public organization and that the involvement of citizens/users is a default *modus operandi*.

### *Operational leadership*

Operational leadership is carried out by the citizen-near leaders who e.g., have the role of team leaders or alike (Krogstrup and Brix 2019). An important role for operational leaders is e.g., to make sure that their team has the capabilities and tools to co-produce on the one side, and that their team members avoid entering the ‘dark side of co-production’ e.g., when inviting or selecting citizens to co-produce (Sicilia et al. 2016). The dark side of co-production relates to the prioritizing users/citizens who are ‘better positioned’ compared to marginalized or disadvantaged groups, and where such selection can lead to increased feeling of inequality within groups (Steen et al. 2018). As an example of a ‘bright side’ of co-production, we find that Thomassen et al. (2020) develop tools and procedures for involving users with mental illness (and their network) to give these individual a voice in co-production. Another role at the operational level is make sure that co-production practices adhere to the current rules and policies, and that the purpose and goal of the co-production initiatives are aligned with the one of the organization’s strategic direction (Loeffler and Bovaird 2020; Frimann et al. 2023). We also find that it is important that the operational leader helps project managers responsible for co-production navigating in (or removing) hindering organizational barriers (Van Gestel et al. 2023). Finally, we find that a focus on creating knowledge for organizational learning stemming from the range of co-production initiatives is an important role as well as the ability to build competencies for formative evaluation within projects (Durose et al. 2015; Magno and Cassia 2015; Brix et al. 2020).

### *Grey zones between leadership levels*

The seemingly black box of managing organizations that co-produce is what happens between the different managerial levels, where different tensions and dual pressures can emerge (Mortensen et al. 2020; van Gestel et al. 2023). While OPA and NPM have relied on traditional

management models with formal hierarchical power and positions, the NPG paradigm challenges these roles and creates ‘cracks’ in existing managerial practices (Mortensen, 2020; McMullin, 2023; Frimann et al. 2023; Tortzen 2018). Grøn et al. (2024) provide an interesting study of the interactions between Mayors and Chief Administrative Officers in municipalities, and how these interactions and the role of each actor has changed the last decade and a half. Another perspective that scholars agree on is that creating a shared language for co-production not only at the ‘production level’ but also at the higher organizational levels is important to create clearer conversations and to better the dialogue e.g., about expectations when linking the different levels in the public organization to one another (Bentzen et al. 2020; Ferlie 2021; Hofstadt et al. 2022).

### ***The role of organizational conditions***

#### *Organizational internal perspectives*

Research shows that co-production functions well with low degrees of centralization and high degrees of connectedness e.g., between intra- and interorganizational stakeholders (Alford 2009; Sicilia et al. 2016). For the decentralization to work, the clear mandates we mentioned above are crucial (Agger and Tortzen 2023). Related to organizational conditions Ostrom (1996) argue, that clear resource boundaries are crucial so expectations and scenarios can be met with ‘reality’ and that social infrastructures should be made to help solve potential conflicts between actors (see also Sicilia et al. 2016; Ongoro et al. 2021). The premise for co-production and collaborative governance to work is flexibility and to avoid shorttermism, and therefore new designs for collaboration and frameworks are required (Ferlie 2021; Aschoff and Vogel 2018). The organizational conditions need to fit with the strategic direction chosen by politicians and the upper-level managers, and here it seems that more research is needed. According to Kleinhans (2017) it is crucial that the organizational internal focus on the

conditions for co-production are well-suited to and aligned with the strategy so co-production strategies do not lead to ‘counter-production’.

### *Interorganizational perspectives*

The organizational internal focus is to our surprise less discussed than the inter-organizational conditions. Sicilia et al. (2016) argue that new managerial skills and tools are required when co-production activities go across organizational boundaries. They stress that it is important that public managers engage in dialogue with users and community groups, so they better can understand what is ‘at play’ when searching for common grounds (public value), and the literature also points to the fact that managers from the individual organizations need to look at the problems in a systemic perspective:

”Different organizations, sectors and levels of governance rarely have the capacity to do what they aim to do on their own. Getting others to contribute makes it possible to do more, and leadership of co-creation is a way to make that happen, although it implies helping others to achieve their goals.” (Sørensen et al. 2021, 276)

The point the authors make is that the public managers easier can mobilize collective resources and knowledge when the need and job to be done is relevant to meet the public interest. Torfing et al. (2019) stress that the institutional designs known from TPA and NPM with horizontal and vertical information processing and managerial hierarchies do not fit to the NPG needs where public value often is the overall goal. In line with this Hofstad et al. (2022) argue that institutional designs and administrative frameworks should be created that both fit with and support collaborative processes that cut across boundaries (see also Brix et al. 2020). Torfing et al. (2019, 813) state that it is important that policy makers are close to the stakeholders and that cooperative relationships should be built to replace the ‘current mixture of competition and

control'. Finally, the public managers' ability to create meta-governance, e.g., by working on mitigating potential differences in institutional logics of the professional organizations, so different managers and frontline staff members are aligned and inspired by the same goals for the citizens/users (Torfing et al. 2019). In other words, they professional co-producers might have different roles in practice, but they all work towards the same goal. Henson (2019, 337) states that "(...) *collaborative efforts between leaders and managers are needed to manage resources and deliver the desired results (...) multiple styles of leadership may be necessary to address the internal and external needs of the organization*". Crosby et al. (2017) stress the importance of finding ways of making distributed leadership work in interorganizational collaborations compared to managers who try to make co-production from the perspective of their own chair. Finally, in the interorganizational perspective it is important cf. Connelly et al. (2023) that leaders are able to navigate in contexts of unequal power relationships and that leaders do not become too inflexible because of e.g., political loyalty (Aschoff and Vogel 2018).

## **Discussion and conclusion**

Our study started by asking following research question: *What can we learn from research on management and leadership of public organizations that co-produce, and which tendencies emerge as avenues for future research?* What we learn from our review is that what worked well from a managerial perspective during times of TPA and NPM does not work well with NPG and co-production (see e.g., Pedersen and Tangkjær 2013; Sicilia et al. 2016; Torfing et al. 2019; Sørensen et al. 2021; Van Gestel et al. 2023). Something new is needed, but the literature does not articulate whether the 'new' must replace the old management styles or create hybrids as we see with the local 'NPM and NPG creatures' of governance (Crosby et al. 2017; Ferlie 2017; Frimann et al. 2022; Mortensen et al. 2020). There is hence a need to further investigate the transition from an administrative management orientation towards leadership

for co-production (Frimann et al. 2022). Pedersen and Tangkjær (2013) stress that the creation of such new knowledge is not only relevant for researchers and practitioners, but especially also for study programs educating the public leaders and managers for tomorrow.

Based on our review we will in the following propose a synthesis that can represent contours of such new kind of leadership, and we choose to present this as the study's managerial implications. This is hence to be seen as our study's main contribution.

### ***Managerial implications: Proposing a new kind of leadership***

Our analysis reveals that managers in organizations that co-produce needs to prioritize and take responsibility for at least five themes. While we still do not know much about the role of political leaders, we have had the opportunity to synthesize current research into recommendations directed at administrative leaders. With the potential to be named normative and populist we call these the 'High-5 leadership rules of co-production' – see figure 1.

First, it is important that the top management decides that co-production is an integral part of the organization's strategy and modus operandi, so it can be communicated explicitly to all internal and external stakeholders.

Second, a co-production strategy should be developed and implemented. Ideally, it would be beneficial to 'co-strategize a second-order strategy' with key stakeholders, so it is based on the perspective of 'what's important and valuable' from those affected (public value). Then afterwards the job is to translate the second-order strategy into the organizations own 'first-order strategy', which the organization can be accountable for.

Third, to realize the strategy managers must break down silos and arrange for internal processes and procedures so organizational barriers do not hinder or create unnecessary bottlenecks. Decentralization is key to put knowledge into use the best way possible and



therefore it is important define clear roles, responsibilities and mandates when managers from above delegate and distribute the work to be done.

**Figure 1:** The ‘High-5 Leadership rules for co-production’



**Source:** Authors’ own development

Fourth, managers must enable interorganizational collaborations with actors from both private, public and third sector organizations. In this regard it is important to understand how does what, why, and when so the professional collaborators on the one side can harvest the fruits of ‘collaborative productivity’, and the users/citizens on the other side can experience a service that is relevant and valuable to them.

Fifth, managers have to build a collaborative culture where ‘thinking evaluatively’ is essential. The point is that the ability to operationalize and evaluate the outputs and outcomes

of co-production is important to create learning within activities as well as the ability to learn across multiple co-production initiatives, projects and programs will become essential, and strategies for how to enable collaboration across administrative and organizational boundaries. A crucial part of the ability to think and act evaluatively is also to accept that changes take time. Hence, it takes courage to accept slow, but correct steps in the right direction toward becoming an organization that co-produce and functions well as such; the ‘work slow – work fast’ mantra is better than making quick decision and forcing the organization to change.

### *Implications for research*

While the ‘High-5 leadership rules for co-production’ do not necessary represent a new leadership theory for co-production, it demonstrates what is found in the current literature to ‘matter most’ to prioritize. Since we are synthesizing the scholarly work of others we do not know if or how the High-5 will work, as well as we do not know what the sixth, seventh and eight elements would be. More research is needed. In addition to this, we will proceed to propose a more general research agenda for studying the role of leadership and management of organizations that co-produce.

### *Proposing a research agenda*

1. Formal organizational hierarchies do not fit well with collaborative governance and co-production seen from a management and leadership perspective, e.g., since hierarchical organizational power does not resonate with equal partnerships and cross organizational collaboration.
  - A. Which new forms of co-strategizing would help us onwards?
  - B. Which types of (new) inter-organizational designs promote co-production?
  - C. What characterizes extra-organizational leadership
2. Creating the managerial (and cultural) change from traditional management from NPM towards having a well-functioning hybrid that also fits with the expectations and requirements from NPG does not occur overnight or with any quick-fixes. The entire management chain from the political level to ‘bottom’ of the hierarchy have to accept

that it takes courage to ‘walk slowly but steady’ instead of having managers pacing themselves and their organizations with constant more or less relevant changes.

- A. What are good criteria for evaluating if a change makes sense or not and to whom when managers want to transition the organization to become an enabler for co-production?
- B. Under which conditions can longer time perspectives thrive compared to shorttermism?

### *Critical factors for future research*

1. New contributions on leadership and management of organizations that co-produce should pinpoint if the conclusions made are related to 1) a general theme or 2) a specialized area or level of leadership and management. This would help the literature grow in a clearer direction compared to how the current state is.
2. New contributions on leadership and management of organizations that co-produce should focus on the grey zones between different management levels to identify roles and responsibilities and the interrelatedness. This goes not matter if the organization design is based on formal hierarchy or a matrix structure; the problems of coordinating expectations and responsibility does not go away but changes shape.
3. New contributions on leadership and management of organizations that co-produce should focus on how second-order strategies can be translated into meaningful strategies for co-producing organizations.
4. New contributions on leadership and management of organizations that co-produce should focus on how the ability to think and act evaluatively can be realized both in theory and practice and with reference to evaluation of initiatives and programs. In addition, the phenomenon co-evaluation is seen as an important avenue for future research.

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