COMPETENCES ASSOCIATED TO SUSTAINABLE LEADERSHIP PRACTICES: A STUDY CARRIED OUT IN THE PUBLIC CITY ADMINISTRATION OF FAZENDA RIO GRANDE, STATE OF PARANÁ

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The purpose of this article is to identify the competences associated to sustainable leadership practices in the public city administration of Fazenda Rio Grande, Paraná.

Literature review: The study addresses the concepts of professional competences and sustainable leadership and how they can be applied to the public sector from the perspective of public city administrators.

Method: This is a qualitative and exploratory study that was carried out in the City Hall of Fazenda Rio Grande, Paraná. It derived out of the analysis of official documents and semi-structured interviews conducted with eleven public city administrators.

Results and conclusion: The study has revealed that the necessary competences for sustainable leadership practices in the public administration of Fazenda Rio Grande, Paraná are: public resource management, strategic planning, focusing on citizens, people management, environmental sustainability orientation, and environmental awareness.

Discussion: The study can provide public administrators with a way to reflect upon their practices, which can positively impact the improvement of their competences and conduct related to the performance of their duties, along with working as a model for public policies characterized by social transformation.

Originality/value: Identifying the competences associated with sustainable leadership practices in public administration facilitates reflection about the enhancement or development of attributes that are essential for improving the quality of life and well-being of citizens, along with promoting sustainable territorial development at the local level.

Keywords: Competences, Sustainable Leadership, Sustainable Development, Public City Administration, Fazenda Rio Grande/Paraná.

RESUMO

Objetivo: O objetivo deste artigo é identificar as competências associadas ao exercício da liderança sustentável na administração pública do município de Fazenda Rio Grande/PR

Referencial teórico: A pesquisa aborda os conceitos de competências profissionais e liderança sustentável e sua aplicação no setor público sob a ótica dos gestores públicos municipais.

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**Método:** Trata-se de uma pesquisa qualitativa e exploratória que foi conduzida na Prefeitura do Município de Fazenda Rio Grande/PR, a partir da análise de documentos oficiais e de entrevistas semiestruturadas aplicadas a onze gestores públicos municipais.

**Resultados e conclusão:** O estudo revelou que as competências necessárias para o exercício da Liderança Sustentável na Administração Pública de Fazenda Rio Grande/PR são: gerenciamento de recursos públicos; planejamento estratégico; foco no cidadão; gestão de pessoas; orientação para a sustentabilidade ambiental; e, consciência ambiental.

**Implicações da pesquisa:** A pesquisa pode propiciar aos agentes públicos uma reflexão acerca de sua prática, o que poderá impactar positivamente no aperfeiçoamento de suas competências e condutas relativas ao exercício de sua função, bem como, servir de parâmetros de políticas públicas com cunho de transformação social.

**Originalidade/valor:** Identificar as competências associadas ao exercício da liderança sustentável na administração pública possibilita a reflexão sobre o aprimoramento ou desenvolvimento destes atributos essenciais para a melhoria da qualidade de vida e do bem-estar dos cidadãos e a promoção do desenvolvimento territorial sustentável a nível local.

**Palavras-chave:** Competências, Liderança Sustentável, Desenvolvimento Sustentável, Administração Pública Municipal, Fazenda Rio Grande/PR.

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**1 INTRODUCTION**

Considering the constant social, economic and technological changes, the need for more fluidity and adaptability in work processes and relations is urgent. This complex situation can impact the public sector, which then faces the need of professionalizing its administrators, which is a requirement with basis on the pursuit of a public administration that is not only more efficient, but also sustainable.

As described in the United Nations report *The Future We Want* (UN, 2012), leaders have an important role in the development of policies and strategies that, in an inclusive, transparent and cooperative way, integrate economic, social and environmental aspects.

Therefore, it is important to emphasize the development of sustainable leadership in public administration, a model that can be understood as the “global practice of leadership that is ethical and based on values, striving for economic and social progress in sustainable development” (*European Foundation Development Management* [EFMD], 2005, p. 2), which seeks to promote society’s quality of life and full-time well-being, respecting and protecting the environment.

Taking that into consideration, the following question arose for this study: what are the necessary competences for the consolidation of sustainable leadership in the public administration of Fazenda Rio Grande, Paraná?

In order to organize the structure of the theoretical basis and the presentation of results, the study was carried out in the following steps: a) literature review regarding sustainable leadership and the historical evolution of the concept of competences and the way they are applied to the public sector; b) surveying of the current state of competences in public city administrators; and c) diagnosis of competences associated to sustainable leadership practices in public city administration.

It is important to point out that the city of Fazenda Rio Grande became a signatory to the United Nations Global Compact on March 27, 2019, when it made a commitment to
contribute to reaching the agenda for global sustainability, the 2030 Agenda, made up of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG).

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, theoretical aspects will be addressed, along with previous research that has been made regarding professional competences and globally responsible leadership (or sustainable leadership) and their application to the public sector.

2.1 Competences: A Brief Introduction to the Historical Evolution of the Concept and its Application to the Public Sector

In order to review the literature concerning the concept of competence, Fleury and Fleury (2001) established a dialogue between American and European schools. In these authors’ opinion, the discussion on competence takes form after the publication of the article *Testing for Competence rather than Intelligence* by McClelland in 1973. In this document, the authors pointed out that academic-type intelligence tests possessed shortcomings with respect to evaluating the performance of executives occupying high rank positions in their companies and, therefore, should be replaced by a competence evaluation.

In the 1980s, the reanalysis of data from studies by Richard Boyatzis (1982) identified a group of characteristics and traits that mark superior professional performance. According to this view, the concept the competence is understood as the set of abilities, skills, and attitudes that form the basis of high-level performance. However, these competences were still related strictly to needs that were established by specific positions or functions in organizations (Fleury & Fleury, 2001).

In the European school, on the other hand, questioning of the concept of qualification and of the professional development process, especially of technical nature, emerged in the 1970s with the goal of bringing education closer to companies’ needs. Nevertheless, the perception that work was not only a collection of tasks related to a position, but instead the result of competences that individuals assemble together when facing increasingly complex professional situations, only arose in the 1990s (Fleury & Fleury, 2001).

From this perspective, Zarifian (2001) defines competence as the individual’s ability to take on responsibilities and develop a reflective attitude so that he or she can deal with increasingly complex issues. According to Fleury and Fleury (2001), competence is a “responsible and acknowledged way of knowing how to act, which entails mobilizing, integrating, transferring knowledge, resources and abilities that add economic value to the company and social value to the individual” (p. 188). In the opinion of Carbone et al. (2009), competence is understood as performance expressed in a specific context, regarding mobilizing and applying knowledge, ability and attitude. Dutra (2007), conversely, assures that competence is the individual’s capacity to mobilize internal resources to generate results within the company’s strategic goals.

Concerning these dimensions of competence, Parry (1996) states that knowledge comprises ‘knowing’ and is related to the body of information and concepts assimilated and structured throughout someone’s life. Ability or skill comprises ‘knowing how to do’ or ‘being able to do’ and is about the capacity of appropriating and applying acquired knowledge in a productive and effective way, which develops with time and practical experience. Attitude, finally, comprises ‘knowing how to be’ or ‘wanting to be’ and is about the conscious and emotional decision about how to act and react in day-to-day life in relation to facts and other people.
Despite becoming more recurrent, competence-based management in public service, as pointed out by previous studies, is still not consolidated. This is due to diverse factors such as management discontinuity, lack of staff awareness or perception about knowledge and abilities that are needed to perform a task or duty, lack of support from senior leadership, culture and organizational climate, lack of legislation about the topic and fondness for traditional management practices (Carmo 2017; Giudice, 2012; Kriiger et al., 2018; Silva & Mello, 2011).

It is noted, though, that the implementation of this management model occurs progressively in the public sector as administrators acknowledge its benefits, seeking to follow and utilize this model, in addition to adopting competence-based management as an alternative way to have flexible, dynamic and effective management (Guimarães, 2000), propelled by concerns regarding the efficiency of public management and regarding public processes and services that are innovative and high-quality.

2.2 From Administrator to Sustainable Leader in Public Administration

The theme of leadership has been a topic of study and research in different fields of knowledge under different perspectives and contexts. In this section, we will address the concept of sustainable leadership and how it is applied to the public sector.

As management and leadership challenges become ever more present and complex, more is to be expected from public administrators. Being a leader in an environment laden with high levels of uncertainty and constant change demands that challenges be understood, approached and managed in an efficient way, which requires alternative management and leadership models (Hind et al., 2009).

Addressing the challenges to training leaders in the public sector, Smith (2003) states that “there are many people being left behind. There are a lot of people who feel excluded. More people need to be assisted. The environment needs to be protected. Agendas need to prioritize peace and security topics” (p. 105). Therefore, leadership that promotes innovation and sustainability by incorporating these issues into their management and government programs becomes a possibility for paradigm shift.

Taking into account the concept of globally responsible leadership developed by the EFMD, with support from the UN Global Compact, it can be pointed out that:

The leadership that is needed now and in the future can be described as globally responsible leadership. This entails the global practice of leadership that is ethical and value-based, while seeking economic and social progress for sustainable development. It is based on the fundamental understanding that the world is interconnected, and on the acknowledgement that economic, social and environmental progress is necessary. It also requires the foresight and the courage to place decision-making and management practice in a global context (EFMD, 2005, p. 2).

In this regard, if the public administrator is committed to sustainability, his or her actions may result in better operational performance and the possibility of greater citizen engagement in a campaign towards effective collaboration against the global crisis. Therefore, the development of sustainable leadership in the public sector becomes relevant, with local sustainable development in mind.

Some variation in the usage of the terms sustainable leadership and globally responsible leadership can be noted in the literature. In the present study, these terms are understood as synonyms; the expression “sustainable leadership” has been chosen, since the word “responsible” is already widely utilized in the public sector, such as in the case of the Federal Law nº 101/2000, also known as the Fiscal Responsibility Law, which defines norms for the
control of public finances, with planning and transparency, aiming for the enforcement of fiscal targets.

Based on what has been reported so far, responsible leadership in the public sector is understood in this study as the set of characteristics and competences that are essential for the integration of economic, social and environmental aspects while planning and operationalizing public policies and strategies of public interest, with the goal of promoting the well-being of society and respecting the limits of the planet.

3 METHODOLOGY

This study was developed through a qualitative survey, aiming to deepen the understanding about a specific social group or organization (Goldenberg, 1997). Taking into account its objectives, it can also be classified as an exploratory survey, seeing that it sought to increase familiarity about a phenomenon or a process, aiming to make it more explicit by way of enhancing ideas or discovering intuitions (Gil, 2002; Santos, 2015).

The present study utilized a semi-structured interview that “integrates close and open-ended questions, which allows the interviewee to elaborate on a topic without being limited to the original question” (Minayo, 2015, p. 64). The close-ended questions were used to make up the current profile of the participants, while the open-ended questions, on the other hand, aimed to help investigate the competences that are associated to sustainable leadership practices in public city administration. The research tools were devised taking into account the ‘three pillars of sustainability’ concept, as suggested by Elkington (2011), which was considered appropriate for the theme and context of this inquiry. Thus, the questions were split into three dimensions – economic, social and environmental – in order to make it easier for the participants to understand the respective questions.

Documentary research was also made, through analyses of laws, decrees and other official documents that are available on the city’s Transparency Portal. It should be pointed out that this method “makes use of materials that have not been properly analyzed, or that may be revised according to the goals of the study” (Gil, 2002, p. 51).

The analysis of the data was performed from the perspective of Minayo (2005), who proposes a thematic content analysis, composed of three steps that do not exclude each other, are not sequential, and may overlap. According to the author, these steps are: an exhaustive and thorough reading of the material, the analysis itself, and an interpretative synthesis of the material that has been analyzed.

It is important to point out that the categorization of competences was gradually established throughout the interpreting and decoding of the collected data. The answers obtained during the interviews were grouped by thematic similarity so that each group was arranged into a competence category.

The participants who were invited to participate in the survey were public administrators who worked as Heads of Department in the City Hall of Fazenda Rio Grande, Paraná, from November 2020 to January 2021. These public administrators carried out strategic duties in the organization while having decision-making roles; they had been nominated to their respective positions by executive action.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section concerns the analysis and discussion about the data obtained through the documentary research and the interviews that were carried out with the city administrators.
4.1 Analysis of Official Documents

The documentary research aimed to evaluate the current profile of the administrators while drawing conclusions about the attributes related to the competences that are necessary for the practice of sustainable leadership in public city administration.

As well as having to abide by the Public Worker Statute, administrators are governed by the Complementary Law nº 47/2011, which concerns the administrative structure and in article 9, paragraph 1, states that “the nomination of public workers for the duty of Head of Department is only possible in the cases in which the administrative structure allows for the existence of a hierarchy with other public workers that are subordinate to the Heads of Department; the Heads of Department must also possess decision-making competence and be at a strategic level in the Secretariat” (Fazenda Rio Grande, 2011).

Except for decision-making competence and strategic-level duties, no official documents were found that described the competences that were required from public administrators or that dealt with promoting sustainability, from which one can infer that discussion of those concepts is at an early stage in the city administration.

4.2 Profile of Interview Participants

Eleven public city administrators took part in this survey. It can be pointed out that most of the interviewees have completed a post-graduation degree – either a specialization degree or an MBA. None of the participants have a Master’s Degree or a PhD.

It can also be observed that nine out of the eleven participants have worked for five years or more in the city administration, and that all of them had been nominated as Heads of Department more than a year prior.

It must be pointed out that the selection of participants enabled addressing the totality of the research problem. However, in addition to the availability of the administrators for participating in the study, we limited the inclusion of more participants using saturation as a criterion, that is, taking into account the regularity of the conceptions and explanations that are related to the theme of this study.

4.3 Competences Related to Economic Sustainability

Regarding economic sustainability, the public administrators remarked that leaders need to be knowledgeable about the economic and budgetary aspects of the public sector; that they need to know how to make use of indicators to use economic resources in an efficient and sustainable way; finally, that they should take the initiative to incorporate good practices that assure economic sustainability in the institution. Knowledge about planning and decision-making abilities were also attributes that were mentioned in the interviews, as one can observe in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Competences related to economic sustainability</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interview excerpts</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Understanding of the efficiency principle is necessary” (P1);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Leaders must enable the incorporation of good practices that assure economic sustainability in the institution” (P2);</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

null
“[...] knowing his field well, as well as the community” (P3);
“Knowledge about the community and the needs of citizens” (P4);
“[...] meeting social demands with responsibility and commitment” (P5);
“[...] focusing on the well-being of the population” (P9);
“[...] observing and being aware of social demands” (P10).

“I believe that leaders should have a thorough understanding of the rights and duties of public workers” (P1);
“Keeping up to date with the Public Worker Statute [...]” (P2);
“[...] emotional intelligence, empathy, conflict resolution” (P4);
“[...] engaging staff and encouraging attitudes that make a difference” (P11).

Analyzing and measuring the results of activities with the well-being of citizens in mind (S);
Being accountable for the impact of his or her actions (A).

Understanding principles and practices when managing people in the public sector (K);
Having communication and conflict-resolution abilities (S);
Engaging and encouraging staff in the adoption of practices that focus on the well-being of the population (A).


It is noted that the answers can be split into two groups: aspects that are internal and aspects that are external to the institution. Therefore, it is understood that social sustainability can be validated by the participation of the interested parties in the choices and in the decision-making processes, since customers – or citizens, in the case of the public sector – are the ones who impact the growth and sustainability of organizations (Sierdovski et al., 2020). Thus, social responsibility should be worked on collectively, at the service of the community with responsibility and permanent participation (Albornoz, Contreras, Álvarez, Bazán & Acevedo, 2023).

It can be concluded, then, that in order to achieve social sustainability, administrators need to develop both technical and behavioral competences so that a dialogue with and in favor of citizens can be established, improving their relationship ability and promoting their engagement.

4.5 Competences Related to Environmental Sustainability

Regarding environmental sustainability, the participants reported that it is important that leaders in the public city administration be aware of the main fundamentals related to sustainability and environmental protection legislation. In addition, they must also be able to implement and promote actions and public policies that protect the environment, and be able to engage other parties that are interested in the aforementioned topic.

In the opinion of these administrators, leaders must be an example to be followed by staff and, therefore, they should be able to create awareness and mobilize their staff when adopting environmentally sustainable practices, as per the information presented in Table 3.
Table 3: Competences related to environmental sustainability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview excerpts</th>
<th>Description of pieces of knowledge (K), skills (S) and attitudes (A)</th>
<th>Competence categorization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Knowledge about the sustainability concepts themselves [...]” (P1);</td>
<td>Understanding the fundamentals related to sustainability and the environment (K);</td>
<td>Orientation for environmental sustainability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Knowledge about sustainable practices [...]” (P5);</td>
<td>Incorporating environmental sustainability into the strategies and activities of the organization (S);</td>
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<tr>
<td>“[...] implementing regulations, projects, and sustainable actions” (P8);</td>
<td>Articulating with other interested parties to disseminate and implement actions that promote environmental sustainability in the city (A).</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>“[...] looking for alternatives and partnerships [...]” (P9);</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“[...] keeping up to date with environmental legislation [...] being an example and enabling the adoption of good environmental practices” (P2);</td>
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<tr>
<td>“[...] collective conscience, so that I know that my actions might hurt others” (P3);</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“[...] promoting environmental protection actions” (P5);</td>
<td>Knowing about the city’s natural resources and environmental protection laws (K);</td>
<td>Environmental awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“[...] training in environmental topics, such as the environment and environmental protection legislation” (P9);</td>
<td>Basing actions and decisions on respecting the environment (S);</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Leaders must always be an example for employees [...]” (P11).</td>
<td>Encouraging staff to adopt sustainable environmental practices, with coherence and commitment (A).</td>
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</table>


According to Barbieri (2020), the actions of the government that seek to avoid environmental problems are generally reactive, corrective and punitive in nature. Nevertheless, it is necessary to take into account the remaining principles along with governmental action measures to achieve the protection of the environment and the improvement of productive systems.

Due to their decision-making powers and the scope of their work, administrators possess ample responsibility in promoting development that is characterized as sustainable while supporting actions that turn their attention to social and environmental issues (Bizarria, Barbosa, Santos & Oliveira, 2021).

However, as environmental problems increase in number and complexity and spread beyond local boundaries, public administration must count on leaders that turn their efforts to protecting the environment, a factor that is equally important to economic development and to promoting social well-being.

5 CONCLUSION

Management through competences applied to the public sector has become the subject of extensive research, much of which points to benefits to improving the efficiency of processes and services that are provided to citizens. Nevertheless, in order to follow the evolution of technology and the needs of society in the long term, an adequate mix of competences that
contribute to economic development and to achieving the well-being of citizens is necessary, while respecting and protecting the environment.

Under this perspective, interviews were made with eleven public administrators with the goal of investigating what are the competences that are needed for sustainable leadership practices in public city administration. In the opinion of the participants, these competences are: management of public resources, strategic planning, focusing on citizens, people management, environmental sustainability orientation, and environmental awareness.

The official documents do not address, besides the decision-making competence, attributes that are necessary for the position. These documents also do not allude to economic, social and environmental sustainability. Corroborating this affirmation, the interviewees have emphasized that all of the aforementioned competences must be developed or improved.

Society has been facing dilemmas and complex issues with global reach, which requires collaboration between different sectors and, therefore, engaging and training local agents may be a good strategy for sustainability-oriented transformation. This is the case because cities are the places where people access the main public services and institutions, and where administrators have more ease of access and possibility of creating awareness and mobilizing both the civil society and the private sector. These, in synchrony and harmony with public administrators who make aspects related to sustainability a priority in their work, may be able to contribute to sustainable development for current and future generations.

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