**Building a Leadership Brand within the Public Sector:**

**A Critical Assessment**

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**Abstract**

This paper investigates the potential utility of leadership branding for the public sector by applying it as a sense-making approach to recent cross-sector leadership development initiatives that have been launched in the New Zealand State sector over the past eight years. We critically assess the collective effort to build a new, distinctive and positive leadership brand for the New Zealand public service aimed at improving the material and perceived performance of the public sector. Based on a discursive analysis of documentary evidence produced by the central actors within the NZ government who are charged with leadership development across the state sector, we have sought to investigate the discursive practices of leadership roles and identities. Specifically, we ask two questions: what have been the dominant discursive constructions of leadership that have been promulgated within the New Zealand state sector? To what extent do these serve to strengthen or weaken a compelling leadership brand? The study observes that, while leadership is constructed in a loose and ambiguous manner, two dominant themes persevere: leadership is primarily cast as a top-down process that is required to serve managerialist ends. We conclude that the leadership brand building efforts to date might well be hampered because of their exclusive, functionalist, internal and leader-centered focus.

Keywords: Leadership brand, public sector leadership development, organisational brands, New Zealand, discursive practice.

## Introduction

This paper investigates the potential utility of leadership branding for the public sector by applying it as a sense-making approach to recent cross-sector leadership development initiatives that have been launched in the New Zealand State sector over the past eight years. A good leadership brand has been defined as 'a reputation for developing exceptional managers with a distinct set of talents that are uniquely geared to fulfil customers' and investors' expectations' (Ulrich and Smallwood, 2007). A company with a good leadership brand inspires faith that employees and managers will consistently make good on the firm's promises. The concept was initially developed Ulrich and Smallwood (2007) in an effort to shift organisational leadership development efforts away from developing individual leaders to a broader and more sustainable focus on inculcating a distinctive leadership brand for the organisation which will endure beyond the immediate CEO and his or her leadership team. Ulrich and Smallwood argue that 'a focus on leaders emphasizes the personal qualities of the individual; a focus on leadership emphasizes the methods that secure the ongoing good of the firm and, in the process, also builds future leaders' (Ulrich and Smallwood, 2007, p. 77).

While this normative concept has been targeted primarily at private sector for-profit organisations and global conglomerates, we believe that it has analytical potential for assessing and evaluating leadership development activities that are conducted at the level of the individual

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public sector agency as well local, regional and national public sector systems. According to Ulrich and Smallwood (2007), building a strong leadership brand requires organizations to follow five principles: they are effective at setting strategy and they groom leadership talent in order to implement this strategy; they ensure that managers internalize external constituents' high expectations of the firm; they evaluate their leaders according to those external perspectives; they invest in broad-based leadership development that helps managers hone the skills needed to meet customer and investor expectations; and they track their success at building a leadership brand over the long term.

In 2014 the New Zealand State Sector Commission (SSC) initiated a new leadership development programme aimed at significantly changing how the state sector identifies, develops and utilises leaders and talented people from the start of their careers to their most senior levels. To support the delivery of key components of this leadership and talent work, SSC works in partnership with the Leadership Development Centre (LDC) which predominantly assists central agencies to develop their internal talent management practices. SSC has designed a new Leadership Success Profile (LSP) as a model that takes a more inclusive view of leadership that endeavours to incorporate the views of the customer who use the services, notionally New Zealand citizens (SSC, 2015). These recent initiatives align with the earlier attempts to create an all-of-government brand or 'brand identity' for use by State Services organisations. The All-of-Government Brand Policy and Guidelines (2007) were introduced to make government services – mainly how taxpayer funds are used to provide programme, services and infrastructure, more visible and identifiable for New Zealanders.

Based on a discursive analysis of documentary evidence produced by the central actors within the NZ government who are charged with leadership development across the state sector, we seek to investigate their discursive practices aimed at creating normative leadership roles and

identities. Specifically, we ask two questions: what have been the dominant discursive constructions of leadership that have been promulgated within the New Zealand state sector? To what extent do these serve to strengthen or weaken a compelling leadership brand? Based on our analysis, we aim to critically assess the quality of the collective effort to build a new, distinctive and positive leadership brand for the New Zealand public service which is aimed at improving the material and perceived performance of the public sector.

## Leadership, brands and the public sector

Identity-shaping and management has become a critical focus for organisations from all sectors as a means for coping with an increasingly uncertain environment by attracting retaining customers, shareholders, stakeholders and employees (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000). A brand-oriented approach to leadership is another way of expressing a conscious desire to create and communicate an organisational identity. Along these lines, a leadership brand takes precedence over the product, and emotional values and symbolic meaning become central to management in the organisation (Urde, 1997). The stronger the sense of affinity held towards the leadership brand, the more reinforcing are its effects and the greater the impact. Thus, the brand creation process is a dyadic relation and multi-faceted dynamic process relying on the participatory efforts of all stakeholders as employees, consumers, partners and investors involved in the leadership brand co-creation process.

Senior leaders and managers within the public sector demonstrate a lack of understanding about what a leadership brand stands for. Leadership branding is often treated as a cosmetic exercise only, and regarded merely as a launch of new name/logo, program, and stationery accompanied with a new advertising campaign, resulting in having only a superficial effect at best. Indeed, if this "cosmetic" approach is applied in an effort to make a bad or confused business look

more attractive, it is easy to see why these so-called 'rebranding' exercises encourage such cynicism (Gromark & Melin, 2013).

Ulrich & Smallwood (2008) propose that the leader's knowledge, skills and values are shaped by customer expectations. The leadership brand is the capability of leaders at every level of an organisation to bridge customer expectations to employee and organisational behaviour. Distinctive leadership branding is not established by leaders with common attributes, but occurs when the attributes demonstrated by the leaders are linked to the business results and are unique to the firm. A distinctive leadership brand consists of 'differentiators' and 'fundamentals', former being environmental and organizational aspects (Hunt & Dodge, 2000, p. 448) and latter being organization vision, strategy and culture.

Advancing a leadership brand selectively by focussing on the 'top of the crop' leaders is risky because of the high potential and value that the wider stakeholder community including employees and customers can bring from their involvement. This notion destabilizes the principle of leader as an agency by fostering a relationship of reciprocity between the leader, internal employees and external customers and stakeholders interacting with the organization. The utility of these collective findings emphasizes the importance of preparing leaders at every level within an organization to turn customer expectations into employee and organization behaviour.

Branding is most commonly linked to consumerism which disconnects it from traditional public service ethos. Brands are rarely perceived as strategic resources in the public sector. The importance of a brand's and brand orientation's potential lies in their ability to bridge some of the shortcomings of market orientation in the Public sector (Gromark & Melin, 2013). The concepts of markets, customers and competitors are not relevant in the Public sector because they focus primarily on the benefits to individuals, and therefore does not fulfil the public sector

organisation's common *raison d'etre*: its contribution to the common good (Gromark & Melin, 2013).

Scholars in the past (Ritchie, Swami & Wienberg 1999; Harkinson, 2002; Mikkelsen & Schwartenbach, 2004) have noted a tension towards the application of branding outside of the private sector (Schultz et al., 2005) creating barriers for branding projects. The challenges in branding are very different for public sector organizations. Hankinson (2004) refers to this phenomenon "*we do not call it the brand but it is there*" suggests unwillingness among senior managers to apply the term 'brand'. High visibility, intense scrutiny and risk of long term reputational damage can make the brand vulnerable to criticism.

One of brand's most important tasks is creating *trust* (Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Alemán, 2005); today there exists a broad consensus among social scientists that, for society's institutions, trust is an important point of departure for well-functioning democracies (Rothstein & Uslander, 2005). If public sector organisations contribute to increased trust, they contribute to a stronger democracy. Visible, distinct and transparent institutions are easier to interact with, and it is even easier to evaluate and criticise them (Gromark & Melin, 2013). Linking the concepts of leadership[1] and branding offers new insights into leading through complexity and change by using the leadership brand in the public sector.

**Analytical approach and methods**

The foundation of a public sector leadership brand in New Zealand can in many ways be described as the construction of both an *identity* and a *role*. Identity is usually regarded as an

individual's self-perception (e.g. ethnicity, subculture etc.). While roles are the institutional-ised attributes that others ascribe to the individual (such as e.g. job descriptions etc.). And yet, they both share the feature that they are based on 'differences' to other roles and identities (Connolly, 1991, Poulsen, 2007). The leader can be distinguished from the followers both in terms of the role with a formal division of labour (put down in the job description) and the self-constituted relationally positioning of the 'leader' and her/his commitment to an organisation. The intriguing, and to some extent unique, feature of modern leadership (in contrast to older understandings) is the blend of role and identity even in the official perceptions of the term. The role description gives leeway to, and indeed encourages the individual creating of an identity, a narrative, or a branding of leadership beyond the formal role. As Watson points out, in every organisation the individual employee must engage in 'identity work' in order to create a correspondence between the role and self-perceived identity (Watson, xx).

We argue that what the New Zealand State Service Commission has tried to achieve in this context, is to not only construct a role, but also to construct the identity of the state sector's future leaders by announcing through various forms of communicative instruments, their expectations of leadership 'styles' that should be practiced. We have chosen to characterise these as 'discursive practices'. The creation of a role/identity can be described in discourse analytical terms as the creation of a *subject position* (Mouffe, 1993). The subject position is never fixed and always entails ambiguity, but it still remains a discursive practice. The discursive practice, arranges and naturalises the social way in a specific way and informs social practices. In turn, social practices organises particular forms of subjectivity in which humans are managed and attributed certain forms in certain historical contexts (Foucault, 1976).

We have chosen to study the discursive practice of public sector leadership branding as a 'policy initiative'. Notwithstanding leadership often being perceived as associated with agency (the leader), our unit of analysis is the strategic political 'speech' about leadership branding as it

emanates in the strategic documents, not the actual social practice. While it is easy to dismiss speech as mere rhetoric detached from 'real' policy-making, speech denotes important matters such as e.g. who is in – who is out; who is active – who is passive; what is good – what is bad etc. What it tells us is something about our sense of ourselves, our knowledge and understandings of the world beyond emotions, ideology, and motives. It is the study of 'how' language is used rather than 'why' language. In our study we will be analysing five aspects of the policy discourse associated with leadership branding: the formation and use of concepts; the use of metaphors and other stylistic devices; framing; stories and narratives; the explicit and implicit rules for validation (derived from Gasper and Apthorpe, 1996).

*The formation and use of concepts.*

In terms of our analysis, this aspect include how individuals, groups, institutions and processes are named. Is practice described in binary, or dualist terms (e.g. bad/black past, bright/white future)? Also, which nouns and adjectives are used to describe the actors which are described? Are they active or passive? Which roles are assigned to which actors? What is considered to be modern?

*The use of metaphors and other stylistic devices*

For a distinctive leadership brand these environmental and organizational aspects are the so-called 'differentiators' (Ulrich & Smallwood, 2008) while the organizations vision, strategy and culture are the 'fundamentals' (ibid). This results in a unique leadership brand that does not rely on a leader as an agency but rather fosters a relationship of reciprocity between the leader, internal employees and external customers and stakeholders interacting with the organization. Ulrich & Smallwood (2008) additionally propose focusing on preparing leaders at every level within an organization to turn customer expectations into employee and organization behaviour.

Most policy documents are full of various forms of figures of speech. A classic example is the 'market' which metaphorically meaning 'mechanism'. Metaphors can be collected from various forms of human activities, but certain forms seem to be more popular in policy speech such as e.g. war and military ('mobilise', 'battle' 'fight', 'deploy', and 'the forces'), and sport ('score', 'goals', 'win', 'coach' and 'team').

*Framing*

In addition to metaphors and other figures of speech, the policy discourse frames the problems which are to be handled. How is the binary problem – solution relationship presented? Where does the problem belong (Central – local level; a special sector etc.)? Are any actors specially affected?

*Stories and narratives*

Organisational stories are critical in leadership branding process because they do things. They can enact leadership. Boje (1991: 111) defines a story as *"an oral or written performance involving two or more people interpreting past or anticipated experience"*. They reach out and invoke an emotional response and action in employees bringing notions and ideas to life (Parry & Hansen, 2007). This theorizes leadership branding as a tight coupling of social influence (Parry, 1998) and processual nature as a consequence of the emotional connection that stories conjure up in their recipients including employees, consumers and stakeholders resulting from this influence.

Most policy speech comes in the shape of a narrative which portrays the blend of actual events, causality, definitions and 'culture' in a logic and rational fashion. Typically, this narrative follows a classic pattern. A problem (usually a crisis) triggers the attention of decision-makers. The problem is 'solved' by a 'hero' (policy, programme or project) who encounters and manages to overcome some barriers. Any external and unintended effects (casualties) are justified

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as the solution served higher causes. These narratives do not necessarily come with a happy ending – they are often used as 'horror-stories' with an underlying moral message.

*The explicit and implicit rules for validation*

Even though all policy speech naturally is prone to different interpretations than the original ones, any communicator of policy seeks to reduce the scope of interpretation by means of validating certain ones. The whole business of policy arguments entails various techniques of e.g. warranting, claiming, backing etc. (cf, Dunn, 2008). These techniques refer to both studying the analytical/cognitive as well as value-based statements.

**Method and data**

The study has evolved through a process of continuous interaction (Yin, 1989, 1993) between empirical fieldwork observations (level one) and the emerging theoretical concepts (level two). The review of the literature was conducted throughout the research process. The empirical research in the UK and Swedish public sector confirmed the benefits of adopting brand orientation across the organisation (Urde, 1999), more importantly branding as a social and dynamic process to create legitimacy and trust, which prioritises democratic values over economic values and influences everyone and everything in an organisation through a coherent brand mindset (Melin & Gromark, 2013; Gregory, 2007). This academic output formed the theoretical basis for this study, and is presented as a modest attempt at informing practice.

This paper outlines a preliminary exploratory research into leadership branding contextualised against the NZ public sector setting. The empirical study was conducted using information retrieved from various forms of documentary sources including policy and strategy papers, advisory group reports, academic publications, online videos and other relevant information published on NZ central agency websites. This is also the main critique of this study because

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other forms of qualitative or quantitative research methods of analysis have not been under-taken.

An interpretive analytical lens was used to study the proposed "integrated approach to leader-ship and talent" (SSC, 2013, 2015) being put forth by the State Services Commission[2] (SSC), as being intrinsically linked to and geared towards supporting the current Government's Better Public Service program3 outcomes as a whole. The focus of the analysis was to locate the relational aspect, if any, between the leadership notion put forth by SSC as a processual change reinforced from top-down contingent on senior leaders and on the other hand the emergent critical role of leadership branding emphasized in the academic literature as a dyadic, socially constructed process that touches all actors including leaders, employees, consumers, stakehold-ers and partners.

Leadership brand originates from the marketing field, where the branding process has been typified by a top-down management approach. This argument has informed the frame of refer-ence for the study. Thus senior leaders at the executive tier mainly the Chief Executives, Dep-uty Chief Executive's or Deputy Secretary's, Directors were the focal point of this study while project or program managers or middle management have been excluded from the study.

The initial analysis as an in-depth review of the documents was conducted, including written material, to surface the leadership brand concept from within the dominant discourse on lead-ership actively communicated to and exchanged between actors across the NZ public sector

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[2] The Government Chief Talent Officer (GCTO) role was established by the State Services Commissioner in 2014. The GCTO is responsible for improving the capability and capacity of senior leaders in the State services, identifying and addressing skills gaps and taking a strategic approach to developing skilled leaders for the fu-ture. The GCTO also gives strategic advice on workforce capability, capacity and change to chief executives and Ministers. Source - *http://ssc.govt.nz/leadershipandtalent-gcto*.

[3] Delivering Better Public Services within tight financial constraints is one of the Government's four priorities for this term. And achieving results that make a difference to New Zealanders is at the heart of that. Source: *www.ssc.govt.nz/better-public-services*.

central agencies as a discursive practice initiated by SSC. This culminated in a systematic in-terpretive process to understand whether branding had in recent years (past five years) been attributed a utilitarian consideration within the NZ Public sector. There was a definite drive from SSC towards creating an all-of-government brand with the logo appearing on official insignia, campaigns, publications, project-related signage and central agency websites as well as all outgoing external communication. Given this systemic view, one may ask how this brand concept connects with the integrated leadership approach being proposed. The section on em-pirical analysis attempts to further outline this in more detail.

**Empirical analysis**

*Leadership Policy Context*

Public sector performance in New Zealand is managed and coordinated by three core agencies – State Services Commission (SSC), Treasury and Department of the Prime Minister and Cab-inet (DPMC). Of these three, SSC plays a critical role of appointing the agency and sector chief executives to deliver on government's key priorities. The Better Public Services pro-gramme (BPS) which was launched in 2012 has been a key priority for the government to reform the public sector: delivering improved services and better results for New Zealanders, while at the same time reducing cost and increasing efficiency (SSC, 2012).

The legislative changes under the BPS reform agenda resulted in amendments to the State Sec-tor Act 1988, Crown Entities Act 2004 and the Public Finance Act 1980. Attention to a shift in changing the thinking, culture and performance within the sector being a central theme. The legislative changes, especially those made under the State Sector Act 1988, were aided to strengthen the leadership role both for the State Services Commissioner and also for the Chief Executives of individual agencies.

The performance and leadership of the agency Chief Executive was further brought into focus by establishing the Performance Improvement Framework (2008) which was introduced as the instrument for change in assisting chief executives to improve the performance of their agencies while at the same time reviewing their delivery of both government priorities and core business. Tellingly, it was also used to "reward a different set of leadership behaviours" by setting clear expectations around accountability within the system (SSC, 2012). As the State Service Commissioner observed:

> A critical method for making sure the public sector is accountable – getting things right and continuing to raise our game – is having good evaluation and performance measurement practices and measuring what really matters. This is essential in making sure we drive performance to deliver better services, achieve results and meet targets. Two objectives for improving the accountability system are:
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> - using the results focus and information on results to more effectively manage the performance of leaders;
> - ensuring that each agency reports in a way that makes sense to the organisation and to Parliament, given their role. (Rennnie, 2012).

The Better Public Services Advisory Group report 2011 (BPSAG) pointed out a number of changes that were needed to shift the culture and practice within the public sector, including the relevance of establishing "good leadership". It further clarified that this "type" of leadership required a "different leadership style" as one that was "group-"based, where people are enabled to think beyond themselves. However, it is easy to see a growing emphasis on the senior leader as an agency with essential traits, attributes and behaviours necessary for breaking down silos and enabling greater collaboration between departments across the sector:

> What needs to be done better is working more collaboratively across agencies, by drawing on the strengths of others while showing consistency and being smarter at taking the long view. By changing or removing incentives through lines of accountability and reporting requirements, for instance, removing barriers to collaborative behaviour within the system could free people to be more innovative. The type of leaders required will be able to pull together resources, to take otherwise 'disparate points of view and mould them together into common groups' (Better Public Services Advisory Group report, 2011). While it's a very different style of leadership, we certainly have the sort of people required to support and drive this new way of doing things (Rennnie, 2012).

*The Leadership Discourse*

Two dominant leadership stories or narratives emerged from our analysis of the BPS Agenda: 'Leadership as managerialism' and 'Leadership as a top-down process'. The following sections outline the empirical analysis that was framed around these two narratives as the discursive practices evolved took over the past six years.

*1. Leadership as managerialism*

The *Getting to Great* report 2014 galvanized the twin notions of 'people space' and 'authentic leadership' by focussing attention on people management. It proposed that a strong purpose and clear strategy was essential for "effective leadership". It seems, therefore, that the audience for these organisational strategies, mainly internal employees, were reduced to mere passive recipients of the one way information flow who not only lack in capability and capacity to understand these strategies, but also made limited contributions in informing the ongoing strategic improvement and review cycle:

> Staff quickly discern any lack of authenticity in leadership. It seems that how well agency leaders set strategy and purpose determines how well staff 'get' the strategy and then align their day to day activities with this collective ambition (SSC, 2014, p. 10).

> Sometimes staff say they are not told the whole story or messages are spun to stress upside in an effort to be encouraging to staff. Staff see through this quickly. Leaders build trust with their people, ministers and the public by getting on the front foot and telling the truth, even when it's hard (SSC, 2014, p. 12).

Further the stated need for leaders to remain responsive external 'customers', through a shift from an inward to an outward focus, invokes centrality and precedence towards the needs of the customers indicating a preferential management model advocating a market orientation where the proverbial 'customer knows best':

> The leadership team has moved the agency from an inward, technically excellent organisation to one that is more outward looking and responsive to customers: the focus is now on how it can add the most value to New Zealand (SSC, 2014, p.20).

> The system needs future leaders who can collaborate, work across communities and remain focused on the customer (SSC, Leadership and Talent, 2016).

## 2. *Leadership as a top-down process*

The *Getting to Great* report (2014) also outlined specific examples of what can be achieved when authentic leadership is strongly focused on building enduring public institutions, with the intent that these successful approaches to strong internal leadership are to be shared with leaders and aspiring leaders. We do not refute this view or propose that these senior leaders are indispensable but that it merely reinforces the traditional heroic leadership model based on paternalistic approaches as exemplified by Peter Hughes, the Secretary of Education in the report:

> I think leadership is a process. It's not a personality type. It's a process of engagement to build 'followership' and if you think about it like that, it mostly comes down to communication (SSC, 2014, p.14).

> You cannot underestimate the importance of the chief executive. All of these things, values, culture, vision, motivation, it's all led and shaped by that person (SSC, 2014, p.15).

That there is an element of paternalism is clearly exemplified in the quote below from 'Getting to great report 2014' in which the staff, in the context of performance management and staff appraisal, is compared with children while leadership are enacted as parents:

> We are both proud parents. And as parents we are very aware of our power to help our children to have better or worse lives through our influence and support (SSC, 2014, p. 34).

In 2015, SSC launched its Leadership Development and Talent management programme which made early attempts to spot talent and further develop leaders as they move up in hierarchy across the public service. The primary goal was for Chief executives to show exceptional performance and commitment to the creation of a larger and deeper pool of leaders with the skills and experience to fill senior positions in the Public Service and the wider State Services, now

and in the future (SSC, 2015). The focus on "talent" as leaders "move up in hierarchy" seems attentive towards "top-of-the-crop leaders" further reinforcing the 'great man theory'.

Secondly, the refreshed Leadership Success Profile (LSP) that was introduced in 2015 has been extended to agencies to guide expectations of leaders at all levels within agencies. Its unmistakably aesthetic impact has a symbolism that invokes a visual theme. The metaphorical reference to a "compass – The true North guides" can be seen as giving prominence and providence to the role and characteristics of the leader:

> The outer rim is a bezel, which also guides. At the centre is the leader themselves – their character described by the attributes. An individual's leadership will look different based on personality and external circumstances (role, experiences, culture, gender, age). But, every leader must master the fundamental attributes.

Lastly, a common assessment and benchmarking approach under the Leadership Development and Talent management programme 2015 was aimed at ensuring consistency for measuring senior leaders. This approach follows a 'command and control' approach that exercises a level of authority by the application of the "same standards" for being "measured" thereby setting expectations for conformity from leaders being assessed:

> Common tools will let us deploy leadership and talent to where it will make the most difference. We are creating a common set of tools for agencies and departments to measure people's performance and potential at all levels. Everyone will be measured against the same standards across the State Services. Potential will be unlocked and performance viewed consistently, In time, this will enable analytics to help both people and agencies grow the leadership and talent needed across the State Services for a better New Zealand (SSC, Leadership and talent, 2015).

## Discussion and Conclusion

This study has made use of branding as an analytical lens for exploring public leadership to our knowledge for the first time. Accordingly, this paper has presented a modest theoretical view

which was informed by a critical assessment that took on an investigative turn to surface cognitive and logical spaces within the prevalent leadership discourse. In the process we were seeking to discover compelling reasons for the application of brand orientation to public leadership.

Although the importance or criticality of the role of leaders and leadership in influencing public sector success cannot be displaced, we found that the NZ public sector leadership trends noticeably took on a cyclical mode. Considerable effort was extended in redressing the underlying concept of public sector leadership from one that reframed it as "good leadership" during 2010-2012, to "collaborative and distributed leadership" during 2012-2014 and finally from 2014 until more recently as "authentic leadership" (SSC, 2011, 2014, 2015). There could be other interpretations that this study has not covered and hence are not presented in this paper. By introducing public sector leadership branding within the NZ public sector, this study has identified a definite discursive turn and break in the dominant discourse that has placed leaders and leadership at the centre of state sector reform.

According to Urde (1999), a brand is a strategic resource and an expression of identity which has deep-rooted organisational values and goals and is future focussed towards organisational growth and sustainability. The interpretation of the brands is decisive for their meaning. This meaning does not arise in a vacuum but in a social context (Solomon 1983). We view the various interpretations of leadership brand that have been presented in recent years as being attempts at deconstructing and simultaneously constructing the public sector leadership identity at its very core in a multi-faceted and dynamic way.

The notion of leadership under the Better Public Services (BPS) programme has been subsumed by transitory reinterpretations as seen from the documentary sources analysed in this study.  Our initial exploration has surfaced a rich and thick analytical discourse for the study.

Since its launch in 2012, the Better Public Services program (BPS) has sought to provide an anchorage for the public sector, the prescribed leadership model and associated language that has been presented in support of it has been seen to fluctuate, having evolved through often conflicting discursive practices by actors both within the public sector practice and wider academia.

Ever since its implementation, the BPS programme provided a steady undercurrent for the NZ public sector with a clear and precise articulation of its goals and mission. By contrast, the definition of its prescriptive leadership model is comparatively loose and contentious. It is contiguously proposed as a "managerialism for managing people" to a "top-down process contingent on senior leaders" to one that seems to gather increasing momentum recently around leadership development by "growing leadership and talent" for building capability at the top. We may ask why this is the case and whether this is symptomatic of a more systemic problem ailing the public sector leadership model - a lack of a clear and consistent identity.

We argue that the relevance and utility of leadership branding within the public sector lies in the value created by the brand identity framework that the brand brings to the fore which makes brands 'identities-in-action' that allow stability to be maintained while simultaneously enabling change. But the identity paradox needs further consideration: to be something, you have to keep an eye on what you are not. Brands make it possible to manage this paradox which makes them so successful: they provide identity that is both stable and changing (Kornberger, 2010). This paper thus presents a compelling case for further exploration into the situatedness of the leadership brand concept within the broader public sector.

The paper will critically assess the utility of the leadership brand for public sector organisations as well local, regional and public sector systems as both a normative and an analytical construct. It will identify some of the problems associated with applying a concept that has been

largely applied to private sector organisations to the public sector. It will also point to some of the opportunities for further theoretical and empirical refinements that might improve the utility of the leadership brand.

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