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Social affordances of agile governance

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Abstract

Agile refers to a work management ideology with a set of productivity frameworks that support continuous and iterative progress on work tasks by reviewing one's hypotheses, working in a human-centric way, and encouraging evidence-based learning. In practice, public administrations have started to use agile principles and methods to plan projects, work in short sprints, iterate after receiving feedback from stakeholders, and apply a human-centric approach to arrive at prototyped solutions. To understand the opportunities and challenges public servants perceive when they are asked to apply agile work practices, I conducted focus groups to study the social affordances of agile governance that need to be in place for public servants to adopt an agile mindset and its related practices. As a result of the exposure to agile work practices, public servants are either able to perceive its affordances and are willing to adopt agile, they falsely perceive them or they even remain hidden from them leading to a rejection of agile.

Evidence for practice

- Governments around the world are setting out to transform how they deliver services and collaborate across organizational silos by adopting agile work practices.
- Agile Governance is however seen as antithetical to line organizing in bureaucratic hierarchies and strategic management.
- Civil servants who are asked to adopt an agile mindset and apply agile work practices only see the value, when they recognize the perceived affordances of agile.
- Most middle managers, however, see agile as threatening to their self-efficacy and status and damaging to their habitus will therefore reject agile practices.

INTRODUCTION

Agile refers to a work management ideology with a set of productivity frameworks that support continuous and iterative progress on work tasks by reviewing one's hypotheses, working in a human-centric way, and encouraging evidence-based learning (based on the explanations by Mergel, Ganapati, & Whitford, 2021; Mergel, Gong, & Bertot, 2018). This project management approach and its related practices emerged from software development teams to avoid

waterfall project management approaches in which a project phase cannot be started until the previous one is finished—which was a standardized method following linear assembly lines in the automotive industry. This has led to serious problems, given that mistakes in every previous phase are carried forward into the next phase, and only at the launch point of a new software product do engineers notice failure and errors (Mergel, 2016). To mitigate these shortcomings that are based on previous public management ideologies around strategic planning approaches, the agile manifesto was introduced to change the way that managers lead their project teams and provide principles that focus on user feedback and iterative learning processes (Beck et al., 2001).

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These individual agile work practices can then lead to shortened feedback loops and create the potential for organizational learning.

Agile has proven to be particularly applicable to situations where the solutions to complex and chaotic problems cannot be addressed by exploiting the existing known work practices and administrative routines (Snowden & Boone, 2007). Instead, they require the exploration of unknown or yet-to-be-developed new practices through iteration, trial and error, and continuous feedback.

As Mergel et al. (2021) have shown, public administrations have started to use agile principles and methods to plan projects, work in short sprints to explore the problem space, iterate after receiving feedback from users, and apply a human-centric approach to arrive at higher quality solutions for societal problems. While these approaches are well understood outside of large bureaucracies in software development companies or start-ups, in public administrations the approaches and their applicability are still predominantly applied for digital product development in policy or innovation labs and oftentimes as one-time experiments (Fleischer & Carstens, 2022; Mergel, 2016; Mergel et al., 2018; Tönurist, Kattel, & Lember, 2017).

However, there is now a call to integrate agile methods in other types of projects and decision-making procedures. Some prominent examples include the coalition agreement of the German government (SPD 2021) that demands that government organizations become more agile and digital, the executive order of the U.S. President (The White House 2021) to transform customer experience and service delivery through human-centric approaches, or the most recent approach of the South Korean government to transform itself into an agile organization (Kim, 2023). At this time, a result is oftentimes a faux-agile approach, where consultants offer the right wording in their project descriptions during the procurement process but are rarely able to implement the principles into the administrative practices of bureaucracies. Public servants might be exposed to new work practices once, but can never replicate or adapt agile practices into their linear, bureaucratic routines. While there are usually no legal barriers, there are administrative, procedural, or cultural barriers that prevent the adoption of agile principles and methods into the routines of public administrations.

Similar to technology affordances, which are defined as the perceived tasks that a technology allows its users to perform (Gaver, 1991), agile organizational practices need to be applicable to the existing bureaucratic and process-oriented routines of public administrations so that public servants perceive opportunities to apply them. Agile work practices focus on radical innovations while most of the standard operating procedures of public administrations are focused on routine and standard operations, that by law cannot be reinvented with every client. However, there are many incidences outside standard operating procedures, where public administrations might be able to make use of an agile approach:

generally, the digital transformation of public services comes to mind, where the outcome of the transformative process might not be clear from the beginning (Zhang & Kim, 2016), the distribution of vaccines during the pandemic—a complex public service problem without tried and proven best practices on how to distribute quickly, fairly and evenly to avoid further spread of the virus (Ashepet, Jacobs, Van Oudheusden, & Huyse, 2021; Wright-Lanier, 2022), the climate crisis (Wright-Lanier, 2022), or the implementation of ad hoc sustainability measures during gas shortages in times of wars.

Whether public servants perceive agile practices as opportunities or challenges when they are asked to apply agile work practices or develop an agile mindset remains an empirical puzzle and core to our understanding of how and why public servants might apply or reject agile practices as an alternative or supplementary project management practice in support of their existing administrative routines. To understand what might drive or prevent public servants from adopting agile work practices, I set out to answer the following research question: What are the social affordances of agile governance that need to be in place for public servants to adopt an agile mindset and its related practices?

To answer this research question, I rely on the literature of affordances (Gaver, 1991; Gibson, 1977; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2011) and use an interpretative approach based on data collected through focus group interviews to understand how different types of public servants of a large city administration respond to the call to “become more agile.” I identify different types of social affordances that the focus group participants provide and derive a theoretical framework that can be applied to larger-scale change management and modernization efforts in public administrations.

In the following, I first review the existing theory on agile governance in the public sector and how it relates to the concept of affordances. Then, I present the research design for the empirical part of the study. The focus group participants identified both opportunities and challenges, and these findings are then aggregated into a theoretical framework. Finally, I discuss the theoretical and practical contributions.

THEORY

To situate the empirical puzzle in the existing literature, I first review what we already know about agile work practices and the related literature on the affordances of new organizational practices.

Agile work practices in the public sector

Agile includes the mindset and its related work practices to respond to changing user needs for the design and

delivery of an innovative solution to a wicked problem (Mergel et al., 2021). In the private sector, agile approaches are used to counter some of the unexpected challenges of the VUCA environment, where problems occur due to the digital transformation or the pandemic, which is characterized by high levels of vulnerability, uncertainty, complexity, or ambidexterity (Bennett, James, & Lemoine, 2014; Millar, Groth, & Mahon, 2018). These wicked problems remain a challenge for the public sector, where little experience with the digital transformation of public services and administrative processes exists, technological skills and competencies are outsourced to IT service providers and consultants, and linear process-oriented decision-making is flanked by rule-based and therefore path-dependent innovation procurement approaches.

Agile was previously defined as the need of organizations—and especially bureaucracies—to apply new work practices to become more flexible, adaptive, and rapid in their response to user needs (Mergel et al., 2018). However, the previous wording overlaps to large degrees with the colloquial use of the term Agile and is oftentimes conflated with terminology from emergency management, such as responsive, flexible, or fast. In the public sector, Agile can be seen as a governance framework for an organization's portfolio of agile projects or simply as a project management approach with practices that are focused on iteration instead of long-term (strategic) planning, human-centricity instead of singular expert opinions and learning while collecting data instead of learning in hindsight (Mergel et al., 2021). These approaches aim to replace some of the mechanisms of hierarchical command-and-control structures in line organizations to empower decentralized self-managing teams to apply agile methods to increase the quality and speed of decision-making. Specifically, it includes practices on how to procure, oversee, monitor, and plan individual tasks of projects with an agile mindset, including continuous iterations and improvements through small and frequent releases of project results.

Agile practices include the work in self-organizing cross-functional teams, that are led by product owners and scrum masters, who provide the framing of the problem and remove obstacles for the team. Tasks are prioritized by the self-organizing team that focuses on openness to increase the courage to point out what does not work. They apply a user-centric (research and design) approach and aim to detect their own biases and hypotheses by focusing on user needs only (Patanakul & Rufo-McCarron, 2018; Dwi Harfianto, Raharjo, Hardian, & Wahbi, 2022). The team meets daily and reviews its progress and remaining tasks to continue to work in short iterations with evidence-based testing and prototyping. This form of just-in-time collaborative knowledge sharing, ideation, and learning is in many ways foreign to the current focus on expert opinions who are organized in deep organizational silos with little formal exchanges or communication across boundaries.

I, therefore, propose a new definition that focuses predominantly on the historical origins of the work practices. As a result, I define Agile as *a work management ideology with a set of productivity frameworks that support continuous and iterative progress on work tasks by reviewing one's hypothesis, working in a human-centric way, and encouraging evidence-based learning.*

Agile in public administrations is mostly applied in temporary, experimental environments, such as innovation labs (Carstensen & Bason, 2012), digital service teams (Mergel, 2019), or policy labs (Fleischer & Carstens, 2022). Very little is known about the necessary pre-requisites for public administrations to engage in agile efforts, for example, skills, capacity, policies, leadership, types of public sector problems for which agile is an appropriate approach, what it means for public administrations to be 'agile ready', what the critical success factors are that need to be in place for public administrations to adopt agile approaches, or whether agile is indeed a superior project management approach to strategic planning and other established waterfall-like project management approaches used in public administrations.

One of the empirical puzzles that remains unsolved in this field is therefore how bureaucracies can adapt to or how agile approaches can be aligned with the needs of linear routine administrative processes and how the formal bureaucracy with its learned customs, traditions, and culture needs to adapt agile practices to solve wicked problems. This is especially pertinent given that many of the VUCA world problems have now also reached the public sector and public administrations are searching for the right capabilities and competencies, management structures, and work practices that can address these challenges. They are at the same time confronted with an aging workforce, increasing demands by their stakeholders to create a more enabling bureaucracy instead of preventing societal innovation by actual or perceived administrative burdens and complications imposed by coercive bureaucratic structures (Adler & Borys, 1996).

Affordances of agile work practices

Public administrations work in rather linear, process-oriented, specialized bureaucracies and mostly organize tasks along organizational silos. Their administrative routines are studied in the public administration literature by focusing on structures, governance mechanisms, or hierarchy. The focus on bureaucracy itself has however receded in the last decades as Monteiro and Adler (2021) show even though most organizations in the public and private sectors rely on ever-expanding bureaucratic structures and rules. Especially in public administrations, law-based routines are developed as the standard operating procedure that is highly patterned, quasi-repetitious, and in their execution to a large extent based on tacit knowledge of the office holder (Winter, 2003). Repetitiveness is expected to

lead to cost savings, but also to provide a uniform and expectable way of treating every citizen equally to create stable and reliable service delivery. Similarly, decision-making follows a path-dependent approach with little room for radical or transformative innovation. The result is the tendency of persistence of rigid routines and inertia to the extent that administrative processes tend to increase bureaucratic and administrative burdens on both—public servants and citizens (Burden, Canon, Mayer, & Moynihan, 2012; Leonard-Barton, 1992). Strict compliance to the predefined routines is seen as an end in itself.

However, many of the routines do not necessarily emerge from policy or law but evolve as social practices or traditions: administrative practices change or are iteratively adapted to the context in which individual clients are served, dependent on who performs the process, or what the available resources are (Jarzabkowski, Balogun, & Seidl, 2007; Schultze & Orlikowski, 2004). Feldman & Pentland show that organizational routines do not prohibit change or manifest inertia. Instead, they can be “a source of change as well as stability” (2003:94). Viewing organizational routines through a realistic practice lens shows that they are indeed dynamic and therefore create continuous (although incremental) change while public servants use discretion to adapt their practices to the context or individual needs of their clients (Dosi, Nelson, & Winter, 2000; Feldman, 2000).

Agile work practices make these adaptations in the form of iterations a core element of the process although not in the form of an individual informal practice as a result of personal learning, but as a formal part of how agile teams collaborate, including continuous feedback and work toward full process transparency. This form of learning through iteration is formalized and “allowed” as a feature of agile or servant leaders who support their cross-functional teams by removing potential barriers to their agile work modes (Liden, Wayne, Zhao, & Henderson, 2008).

Whether public servants and their leaders recognize the opportunities or remain hesitant because they mostly see challenges to adopting agile practices can be explained by using the concept of affordances, which goes back to Gibson (1977): Gibson defined affordances as a combination of physical properties of the environment that is uniquely suited to a given animal—to his nutritive system or his action system or his locomotor system (Gibson, 1977:79). Originally, the concept focused on the relationship between an environment and an actor, as well as the behavioral aspects of behavioral or cognitive psychology. It highlights how the existing elements of the context turn a feature of the environment into a possibility for action that is meaningful to an organism. Translated to the social sphere of humans, affordances are therefore properties of the world that are compatible with and relevant to people’s interactions. Humans tend to alter and modify their environment to change its affordances to better suit them. This ecological concept has been expanded to include technical affordances. The information systems literature focuses on the design of

digital interfaces that allow humans to interact with a technology (Gaver, 1991). Other research has focused on the reciprocal interactions between a technology application, its users, and its social context: computer-mediated political expression helps explain which technological affordances enhance or inhibit political expression (Neubaum & Weeks, 2022).

Socio-technical affordances then focus on the interaction of technology and human behavior: people are interacting with each other with the help of technology. As an example, Wellman et al. (2006) studied the impact of social media and Internet use on increased communication behavior. Others have looked at increased civic action and participation of citizens in digital policy-making or the awareness and teamwork in computer-supported collaborations (Carroll, Rosson, Convertino, & Ganoe, 2006). While technology might afford social interactions, it remains undesirable for humans to pursue.

Social affordances expand the canon of affordances and focus on practices that are socially or culturally (in the context of organizations) shaped and their adoption might be difficult to afford. Gibson’s concept originally did not include social affordances, but he hinted at them by providing the following example of a postbox as an object that “affords letter-mailing to a letter-writing human in a community with a postal system” (2014:130). Actors who do not know what a functioning postal system is, will not be able to recognize a postbox and will not understand the interactions it affords. Social affordances relate specifically to social practices and therefore need to be observable and deemed as organizationally and culturally appropriate, whereas other types of affordances can be tested and tried through trial and error or even replaced by updated technologies (Costall, 1995).

If affordances are not recognizable, they remain hidden from public servants (Gaver, 1991). They are actively rejected when public servants observe that they are unethical, unlawful, or counterproductive to existing administrative routines and regulations in their organizational context. They might be perceived as false or lacking action possibilities if public servants do not have any frame of reference based on their experiences and interpretation of the organizational context they operate in (Norman, 1988). For public servants to recognize the social affordances of agile work practice, the practice itself needs to be applicable to them, combinable with their existing work routines and demands, and visible in the organization, so that they can observe how others around them apply a new work practice (Fayard & Weeks, 2014). Based on these prerequisites, public servants then perceive possibilities for action or interaction with others or with pre-existing practices.

Certain agile work practices seem immediately affordable to public servants who already have experience working in task forces or ad hoc project teams. For others, their socially constructed traditions and ways of applying (rule-based) routines, might prevent them from recognizing the opportunities of (new to them) agile work

practices. Social affordances are therefore labeled by Hutchby (2014) as a functional analytical tool to understand that a subject, object, or practice might create constraints or opportunities that enable or discourage the adaptation of existing work practices. Gibson (2014:36) relates this to the animal world, where animals observe each other's behavior, experience the same constraints in their environment, and can then decide how to react based on their observations and thereby create a behavioral loop.

Here, I define the social affordances of agile work practices as the perceived opportunities and constraints of a public administration's organizational environment, its context, regulatory rules and norms, governance structure, current practices, traditions, or technological work arrangements to adopt agile work practices as discretionary actions. Certain triggers lead to a felt discrepancy between current administrative routines and new agile work practices. Only if the affordances of these agile practices are perceptible, public servants will be able to test them, gain agile competencies, and create agile artifacts with tangible outcomes that can be superior to previous ways of working and continue to be observable to their colleagues. Otherwise, the affordances remain hidden or are perceived as false so that they are rejected and not included in the existing administrative routines.

As a summary of the review of the literature, the following conceptual framework guides the research design (Figure 1):

METHODS

Based on the exploratory research question, I have chosen a qualitative, interpretative research design to capture the perceptions of public servants when they are confronted with the possibility (or threat) to change their

current routines and are asked to adopt agile work practices (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013).

Choice of setting and actors

German public administrations have traditionally organized their management approaches based on the "steering governance model" promoted by the Kommunale Gemeinschaftsstelle für Verwaltungsmanagement (KGST, loosely translated: Municipal Association for Public Management). KGST calls its current management model "Agile Public Administrations" which their membership organization (mostly municipalities) are asked to implement as a follow-up governance model to the current steering model of the New Public Management era.

The public administration chosen as the setting to explore the research question is a large city in southern Germany with +100,000 citizens, which is at the beginning of a long-term change process including agile ways of working. Similar to the more than 11,000 municipalities in Germany, their administrative routines are aligned according to the principle of line organizations. While an interpretative research design does not aim for generalizability, I see support for the transferability of the findings to other public administrations with similar modernization efforts. The purpose of this case study is to extend the existing theory of affordances that has predominantly focused on affordances related to technology and expand it into a new context of agile practices as well as to the public sector.

Data collection

The data collection is based on Merton, Fiske, and Kendall's (1990) focus group study design. In a focus group,

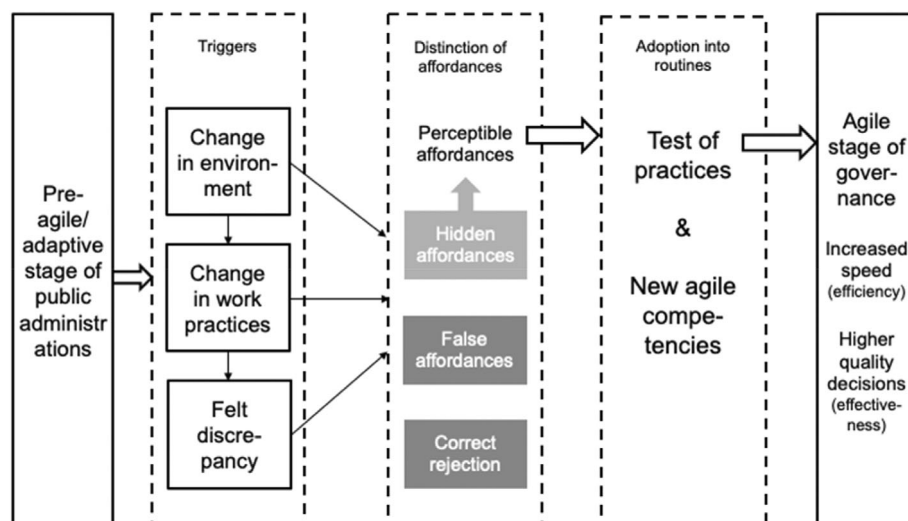


FIGURE 1 Conceptual framework based on the literature on social affordances.

the subjects need to be exposed to a certain incident or trigger so that the researchers have the opportunity to analyze this triggering element. In this case, the trigger was a presentation of the head mayor's "Vision 2030 - How to become the most agile city administration in Germany". The public servants included in this study participated in the presentation and received a 2-page document with the core tangents of the vision exposing them to the leadership expectations.

The research team first conducted five expert interviews to perform a situational analysis of the current status of the adoption of agile in public administrations, the prerequisites of how public servants are currently working, and how other public administrations have introduced agile work practices in comparable bureaucratic environments.

The situational analysis as well as a review of the existing literature on agile practices then served as the basis for the interview guide that includes the main areas of inquiry. The research team asked each focus group about their first reactions to "Vision 2030" to understand their reaction to the newly erected situation they are facing. In more detail, they were then asked about their understanding of Agile, the work context they are expected to apply it to, the type of emotional reaction they have to the planned agile transformation, and what needs to be changed for them to adopt agile practices.

Each focus group was composed as a result of an initial stakeholder selection process: the research team identified different stakeholder groups based on (1) their shared experience as members of the organization, (2) their influence to lead the change process from linear to agile practices (leadership: mayor/deputy mayors, department heads), (3) their inherent interests to participate and implement agile practices into their routines (public servants: IT department, HR department, organizational development department, citizen's office, trainees), and (4) the necessity to involve them in change processes by law (governing body: city council, personnel council).

The interview guide remained constant across all focus groups and was only adjusted to account for the tasks the different focus groups conducted each day. Following Benighaus and Benighaus' (2012:115ff) suggestion, the interview guide included the following phases: (1) welcome and overview of the purpose of the focus group discussion, anonymity, data analysis steps, the introduction of each participant, (2) introductory question that focused on each individual's perception of the Vision 2030 document, (3) main body of questions focusing on opportunities and constraints of agile practices, and (4) final question and summary of results. The final question summarizes the results and included a call for action to reflect on the needs of the participants: "If you had the opportunity to ride in the elevator with the head mayor for 1 minute, what would you suggest to him to implement the Vision 2030 successfully?" It led to responses that helped the interviewees to identify their core issues with agile work practices.

Following Merton et al.'s (1990:12) suggestion for high-quality focus group interviews, the conversations with the different stakeholders aimed to provide room for a range of responses, follow-ups to extract details about the response, as well as the perceived affective reactions to the initial trigger and their personal experiences with agile.

The interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants and transcribed verbatim to allow for maximum comparability across groups. In addition, a dedicated scribe was assigned to capture memorable verbal expressions, emotions, and other physical cues in situations where the participants might avoid responding, shook their heads instead of verbally responding, or any other expression that could not be recorded on audio devices. A third person participated to pick up any other cues and support the main interviewer during the flow of the discussion. Immediately after each interview session, the research team members wrote a memory protocol to capture their first impressions and any specific observations that were different than expected or deviated from other interviews. These protocols were then used as additional data points for the following data analysis steps.

Data analysis

The data analysis followed Krueger's (2014) systematic scheme for analyzing focus group results. The participating researchers base the qualitative content analysis on their field notes, memory protocols, memorable quotes, and observations, as well as the full interview transcripts.

As a first step, the research team created a deductive coding start list derived from the literature to capture what was already known about agile practices (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013). In an iterative process, the team then selected questions and responses across all interviews and coded them individually, then compared them as a team and revised after discussing differences until the team felt confident that they arrived at a similar mindset when coding the interview sections. This continued for each question in what Krueger (2014) labels a constant comparative mode.

After the initial deductive coding, a second round of coding focused on inductively emerging topics that were not captured by the initial theoretical start list during this first cycle. During the second coding cycle, the research team identified patterns across the interviews and grouped the individual codes into higher-level pattern codes. This coding cycle then led to the discovery of recurring themes that were combined into more meaningful units and concepts.

Following the two-step coding procedure as part of the Gioia methodology (Corley & Gioia, 2011; Gioia et al., 2013), the analytical themes were selected based on the extensiveness and intensity with which the interviewees mentioned them. The research team interpreted

the effect of the initial trigger question based on the “Vision 2030” stimulus, discrepancies that the interviewees expressed, opportunities that they might anticipate (perceive), and any kind of constraints that they mentioned. In interpreting the similarities and differences among the categories (axial coding), we then reduced the categories to the second-order theoretical themes and aggregate dimensions displayed in Figure 2.

RESULTS

The findings derived from the thematic analysis across the different focus groups are divided into two main dimensions: (1) agile mindset and (2) agile practices.

Agile mindset

As part of the first dimension, the agile mindset, the attitude of employees and managers can be identified as an important aspect necessary for the emergence of an agile culture. Based on the focus groups, three concepts emerged that included the attitudes of employees, attitudes of leadership, and the underlying organizational culture and values that are conducive to the emergence of an agile culture. They include agile concepts such as openness, active participation by delegating decisions, shared public service motivation, and individual responsibility with higher degrees of flexibility, but also the necessity for open communication. The aspect of “openness” was mentioned most frequently in all focus groups. To illustrate this, a quote from one of the participants highlights this aspect: “First of all [what is needed]: openness and willingness to work differently than they are used to. I think that would be very important. If that doesn’t change...”. The statements of the interviewees make clear that an open attitude toward new practices is seen as an important prerequisite for the upcoming change process and agile ways of working. Employees and managers need such openness in the city administration so that changes are not rejected from the outset and potential procedural changes can even be considered.

Active Participation in the upcoming change process was important for the focus groups “Staff Council” and “Organizational Development” as a necessary quality or attitude. The attitude toward change was seen as a requirement. This refers to both the individual involvement of employees, but also the proactive approach of leadership to involve employees in a cross-generational approach. In particular, in the focus groups “Frontline staff”, “Staff Council,” “Personnel Development,” and “Organizational Development,” it was emphasized that the fear of reform could be alleviated by more proactively involving the employees and not expecting them to fall in line after major decisions were made. The interviewees anticipate that this will create a climate of acceptance for

the changes and agile practice will be more easily adopted.

A high level of public service motivation could be identified that showed how the civil servants aim to work toward serving a public interest: “(...) why do people work for us, and the meaningfulness of the work was one of the main points, that is, where people said they like to work for us because they see a sense in their work and do something for the public good, that is, not for profit.” This high public interest orientation also emerged as a characteristic of an agile mindset, because results in the willingness of employees to create processes in more user-friendly ways.

Administrative processes tend to be viewed from a citizen logic, which is consistent with the user-centric mindset of agile: “Acting on one’s responsibility”, “flexibility” and good “open communication” are central elements of the user-centric value of agile. For an agile mindset, the interviewees highlight that they are required to work in more self-directed ways instead of primarily following top-down instructions: “Administrative competence in agile, of course, we must also be administratively good, but here also comes through that I work things out myself - am self-motivated.” This item corresponds to flexibility and good communication skills as necessary qualities for an agile mindset, especially because agile practices often involve working in cross-functional teams that require open and frequent communication and flexibility of the employees: “People have to be flexible, agile and innovative and I say also like change”.

The leadership attitude toward agile needs to focus on what can be summarized as an employee-centric form of leadership—or servant leadership (Liden et al., 2008). Across all focus groups, the current understanding of leadership in the city administration was highly criticized as too top-down oriented and controlling. The discussions centered around a call for a new understanding of leadership. Instead of managers who feel the need to know and sign off on everything, the interviewees highlight how there needs to be more delegation of responsibilities to change toward an agile culture. Important aspects that characterize this new understanding of leadership include “delegation of responsibility”, “appreciation and trust of experts”, or “open error culture”:

I would quite like to start with the leadership team first. Because that will be the biggest problem in the administration. The other thing is the new way of thinking. That means, what I, for example, quite like to do myself for a small team, I give person [A] and person [B] a problem, and then I trust the two of them, let them run, and then at some point, they come and say "This is how the problem could be solved". Then I as a manager have to say "I accept that, do that, implement that". In other words, the manager has to get

away from the idea that always dictating what is to be done and how it is to be done. If the manager does not allow that, then agility in this department is zero. This is also the purpose of the Vision 2030 process, to move managers towards this.

The prerequisites for this type of leadership are trust and appreciation toward the employees and their abilities to solve the complex problems mentioned. From the focus group discussions, it became clear that many employees would like to see more trust from their supervisors as well as a more appreciative leadership approach. This includes more appropriate working conditions in the city administration, which were criticized by some interviewees. As evidence of the lack of appreciation, the interviewees mentioned some of the most basic workplace elements, such as the lack of hot water in some administrative buildings, tiny office spaces, and the lack of air conditioning in offices. The personnel council focus group emphasized, in particular, the aspect of “humane working”. Despite technical innovations and automation, social interaction in the administration should not be disregarded. Along the same lines, interviewees highlight a more appreciative interaction with superiors to communicate on equal footing:

If one (...) also trusts in the expertise of the employees and does not go over quite a few levels but also respects it, even if it is not exactly the head of the office, but that it is an engineer or environmental planner. That there is simply trust in the employees and that their opinions are regarded at the same level as those of the head of a department.

Employees would like to see a public servant being able to make suggestions to the head of the department without having to go through the official channels, which is often still a common procedure. As a result, suggestions and ideas from employees often go to waste, which leads to employee demotivation. The lack of an open communication culture is palpable both in horizontal as well as in vertical communications within and between the offices and departments. Communication follows a “top-down” rather than a “bottom-up” approach. As one interviewee emphasized: “(...) finding new and better forms of communication, which is oriented towards dialog (...), is essential and could contribute to a new understanding of leadership.”

While a previously conducted employee survey of the city administration shows that employees feel that mistakes are not understood as opportunities but as threats, the interviewed middle managers stated the opposite. They thought that mistakes were handled positively. This shows a discrepancy in the external perception of their leadership form and their self-perception. An open error culture as a pre-requisite for agile is not implemented yet as most of the rest of the organization stated in their

focus groups. Surprisingly, the top leaders of the city administration themselves were more reflected when it comes to an open error culture:

And of course, I first have to equip the employees with the competence to think freely and to dare to do so. Dare to think freely, and as a manager, I must also allow them to make mistakes. That is, if the two of them buy something, for example, a piece of software for 8000 Euro, and the thing hits the wall and they say afterward ‘the process was not as good as we had hoped’. Then it was simply what it was. Then I know the path is wrong. As an executive, I first have to learn or allow this error culture.

Employees highlight that without a communicated agile vision for the organization, an agile culture and mindset cannot be developed. While the general vision was documented in the 2-page memo to become the most agile city, a communicated strategy and vision by the top leadership on how to implement the Vision 2030 is missing. Especially, because only a few employees were officially aware of the Vision document. Many employees, while familiar with the 2-pager, were not aware of its implications. When asked about it, they criticized that it was a very “vague goal”. In the organizational development focus group, the unclear communication and strategy on the part of the head mayor’s change reform became very evident. Respondents criticized that they felt the researchers were better informed about the process than they, even though they were supposed to play a central role in the reforms:

I think it just needs a strategy that is communicated from the very top, and not that Office A says ‘We want to be more innovative now and want to look at getting away from the old structures,’ that doesn’t work”. (...) It has not been communicated, and then I also had the feeling that he is not really behind it. On the other hand, the university is now also perfectly informed about it, which is also a bit strange, and that also comes across strangely to the employees.

Agile work practices

As a result of the lack of an agile mindset among employees and middle managers with their obvious lack of self-efficacy, very little formalized knowledge exchange about agile practices occurs. Rather than moving toward a self-organized approach to problem-solving, the interviewees highlighted a stark adherence to “old ways of working”, which prevents new practices from emerging and prohibits cross-functional learning between departments. Given the apparent lack of training and as a result

the application of agile practices, there is little opportunity to question the existing routines and administrative processes.

However, when people collaborate ad hoc in cross-departmental teams, experiences, and ideas are exchanged in a collegial albeit rather implicit and informal manner. As a result, the employees can reach out across organizational silos and use shortcuts to exchange experiences about agile practices. However, few experiment with agile practices, because they are not yet modeled by middle managers:

It would be very helpful for the whole process if quite normal employees from the city administration, who do not have a direct line to the head mayor, could experience that those at the top are serious about this, which they credibly show through their behavior that we want a real change in this direction. That would have a signal effect and would be a great encouragement for the people, for our employees to join in.

In summary, the thematic map shows the concepts as well as the aggregate dimensions:

Perceptible affordances

Agile practices are generally seen as a positive approach, especially given the centrality of user- and citizen-centric values that support public service motivation and other-oriented motivation toward improving administrative processes and reduction of administrative burdens. This becomes obvious in the following representative quote:

My main idea of the future vision of the city administration is that the citizens no longer have to run after their administration to get any service they need. They don't have to phone their way through the building from one person to another who doesn't feel responsible and then end up in a holding pattern.

This quote highlights that the interviewees see agile as an approach to change what does not seem to work anymore and what they have already identified as problematic in their administrative routines and practices. Improving the citizen experience, therefore, serves as a driver for a change of the existing attitude toward a user-centered agile culture change when public servants begin

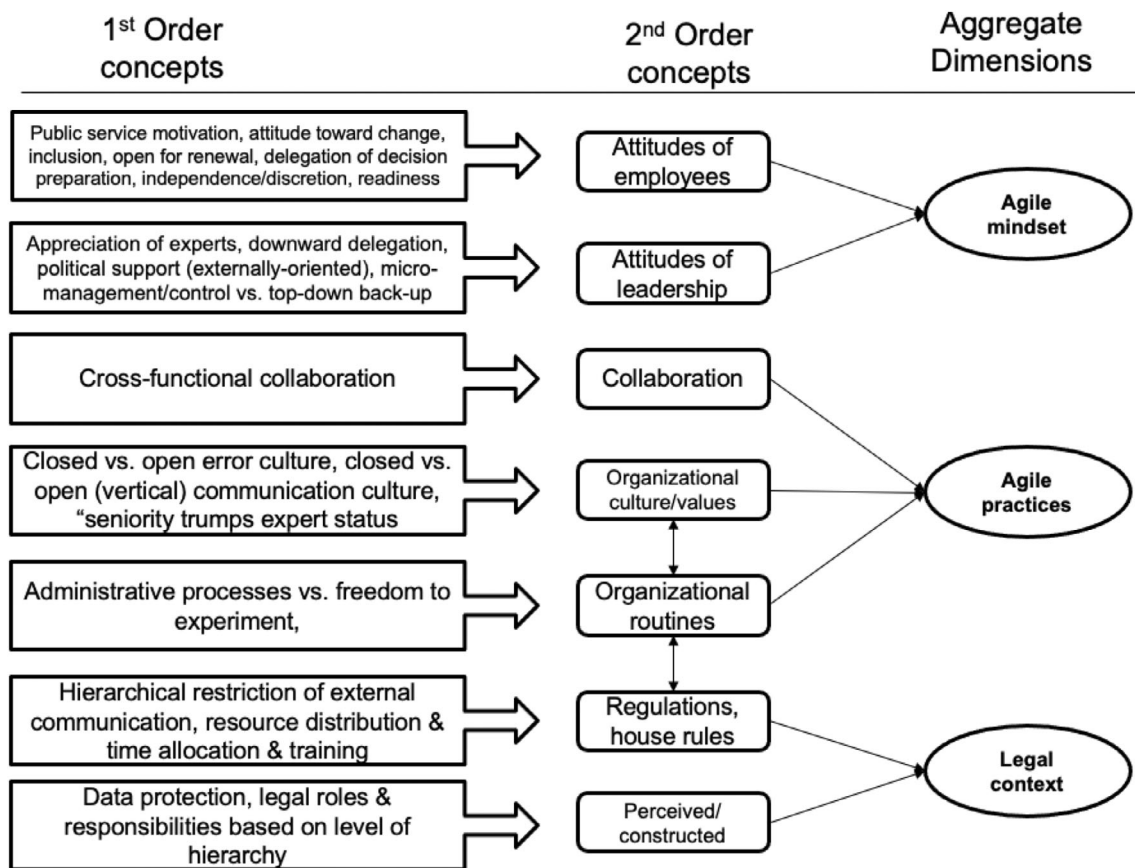


FIGURE 2 Thematic map as a result of the coding process (based on Gioia et al., 2013).

to view the administration from a citizen's perspective rather than through their internal logic. As the quotes show, citizen-centricity stimulates a rethinking of the organizational structure and process organization of the administration and enables a discourse about new forms of cross-functional collaboration. Strengthening interdepartmental work and sharing decision-making responsibilities, which are already informally practiced in the city administration, might help to reduce reservations toward agile across the departments. Furthermore, a more formalized sanctioned way of allowing for cross-departmental collaboration is seen as a way to add value and synergy effects, which contributes to openness toward agile change in work practices and ultimately organizational structures.

Other opportunities are seen that emerge because of the promises of the digital transformation of administrative citizen-oriented processes that initiate some of the agile work practices as well. The legal obligation to transform all 575 administrative citizen-oriented processes in Germany allows the organization itself to question existing administrative services, processes, and workflows:

Of course, digitization plays a very clear role in this, in that a lot can also be mapped digitally. We go into the various departments and look at the processes, and find that one person types it into the computer, then prints it out and hands it to the other person. Then prints it out and hands it to the other person. The other one reads it through and types it up. Things like that. In many departments, many processes are still very broadly based and very, very complicated and we go in and say that processes can be combined, distributed among fewer people, and then, together with the IT department, we look at which parts can be digitized.

The requirements to digitalize administrative processes and public services contribute to an agile culture change because public servants see the need to solve digitalization problems by departing from the siloed departmental logic and helping the organization to move away from a view of strictly subdivided responsibilities to a more holistic view. In the city administration, interviewees and some departments are particularly motivated to actively promote the change process, such as the IT department, which sees itself as a driver and role model for agile practices, or the organizational development department, which is in the process of developing innovative leadership concepts. At the onset of the digital transformation, these changes toward rethinking processes also support agile practices that are allowable as part of bureaucratic discretion.

While the interviewees recognize a few perceptible affordances as opportunities to introduce agile work

practices, they pre-dominantly identified constraints and therefore reject agile.

Hidden, false, or rejected affordances

The interviewees refer to formal aspects that lead to their rejection of agile work practices, such as a lack of resources (personnel, time, equipment). Many stated reasons for rejecting agile are the increasing complexity, and intensification of work requirements, often with scarce or no additional personnel. They highlight reasons that might make agile practices more compelling as limiting factors that will not allow them the time to be innovative or follow through on new ideas for complex problems. This innovation fatigue becomes clear in the following quotes:

Because I already noticed that when new concepts are introduced here, it's often like *"Yes, OK, that's interesting in itself, but not another one on top."* Because we already have so many things and it's not manageable.

There is simply no time resource for it or we lack the human resources, to be able to handle the whole thing, and that's why the innovative strength is there, but it is short-lived because you are afraid you will have to do more.

For this reason, interviewees often reject the alterations of their administrative routines and view agile as an additional workload they cannot stem in parallel to the existing administrative processes. Often, the lack of technical and financial resources in the City administration is criticized which leads to a lack of training in agile methods. Therefore, rejection might need to be interpreted as false or hidden affordances, given that the approaches are theoretical in nature rather than practically tested. There is simply no exposure and room for experimentation with Agile yet.

Many rejections occur because of a lack of self-efficacy among middle managers and leadership: The attitudes that have been identified as hindering the emergence of an agile culture are expressed through statements like: *"We've always done it this way"* or *"There's is no leeway in the law."* Further, the principle of seniority—the "more experienced employees know better than the young", as well as conflicting goals within the organization and "silo thinking" were identified by the interviewees: Rather than understanding what agile is about through appropriate leadership training or leadership experiments, elements such as self-organizing teams and their self-directed task prioritization are outright rejected. Middle managers insist to follow the existing lines of command-and-control

instead of cross-silo communication and collaboration. They seem to be predominantly limited by habitus, social structures, and their existing role in the hierarchy:

When young new people are involved, they usually have great ideas, but there is always someone at the table who says *"But that's not possible because"*. (...) You're immediately blocked by others, either because they have the attitude *"we've always done it that way, that's good"* (...) And in the end, you get *"No, that's not possible."*, *"It's not possible at the hierarchy level."* (...) That's one of the most common answers."

It means that senior managers are resistant to change and do not take suggestions from younger colleagues seriously, instead prefer to socialize newcomers to their own rigid administrative routines as part of the top-down hierarchy. This change-resistant attitude prevents the emergence of an agile mindset and is not conducive to agile culture change. Oftentimes these rejections of agile practices are emphasized by reverting to the law—highlighting the persistence of a zero-failure culture instead of iteration and prototyping, as one civil servant states after they were asked whether they see possibilities to adopt agile work practices in their domain:

Clear answer: no. I am in the area of finance, criminal law, embezzlement, and other criminal offenses. I can't allow a mistake there. That's just the way it is. I am operating under normal sovereign public law activities, a mistake will be punished in court. That is the way it is. There is no innovation, there is no

creativity. There are laws, and the court tells us *"You have either acted according to the law or you have not"*.

This attitude—while squarely rooted in ignorance about the potential advantages of agile and therefore rejected as a hidden affordance—is enforced by leadership attitude. Interestingly enough even though all middle managers and organizational leaders were part of the strategic working group that created the agile vision for the city, they are invoking formal reasons why agile is not an appropriate culture and practice, as the following quote shows:

I would say right now we have a problem with hierarchy. There are certain offices, and parts of the organization, that would like to work more agile, but it's prevented by executives. Because it doesn't suit them or something like that. (...) Simply the hierarchies that we have in the administration and that is counterproductive for such innovative processes."

The following table summarizes the perceptible and hidden, false, rejected affordances identified in the focus group interviews (Table 1).

DISCUSSION

Social affordances of agile work practices, while perceived as an opportunity, cannot be detached from the organizational and cultural environment in which they are enacted. Taking part in an experimental environment to test agile practices in an innovation lab or a one-time

TABLE 1 Summary of findings of opportunities and constraints of agile.

Types of affordances	Perceptible affordances supporting the adoption of agile practices in public administrations	Hidden, false, rejected affordances preventing public administrations from adopting agile practices
Agile practices		
1. Self-organizing cross-functional teams	If legitimization is possible, it would reflect ongoing informal practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Existing ridged, inadequate top-down leadership prevents cross-silo communication and collaboration Limited by habitus, social structures, hierarchy
2. Task prioritization in teams	Recognizable as part of one's bureaucratic discretion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not recognized as part of agile practices, therefore neither adopted, nor rejected
3. Open communication & courage to point out what does not work	Only possible without top leadership in the room	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No psychological safety: Fear of speaking up Restrictive practices: Only highest-ranked person speaks at meetings Retributions and bad experiences
4. User centricity	Partly open to it and digital transformation is seen as a window of opportunity to implement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Outright rejected by leadership: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> By law, the only people to speak to the public Fear of loss of professional status Rejected due to too many "unicorn" solutions Unknown to civil servants
5. Iteration (testing & prototyping)	"This is how we already work"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Preference for linear problem solving, instead of chaos and complexity

consulting project does not afford the possibility of transferring these practices into the existing routines of public administrations. Similarly, simply declaring to become an agile organization—as seen in this case—does not lead to the adaptation of the existing administrative routines.

The willingness to experiment and perceive agile practices in top-down hierarchical bureaucracies has to be carefully prepared by top and middle managers and collaboratively designed first, so that agile can be experienced in a longer behavioral feedback loop by the participants before they might follow suit and can perceive the affordances of agile for their day-to-day routines. Scaling up agile practices to be accepted into the routines of public administrations, therefore, follows a complicated cognitive process, that includes the recognition that an affordance exists, it has to be perceived to be of use, and civil servants then need to act on these insights to generate positive effects that in turn deepen their cognitive perception of a positive affordance as an opportunity to change the way they work and ultimately change structures, decision-making processes and potentially the organization's culture.

For public managers, it is therefore important to first identify a top-down strategy that is well communicated and then start with the implementation of easy-to-use artifacts of agile practices. In some organizations changing the way that meetings are conducted can be a good first step: Instead of relying on the most senior person in the room to set the agenda and be the sole speaker, public administrations could start by practicing a collaborative approach and ask all attendees to submit items to the agenda or take turns in running meetings.

The question remains, especially in environments with rigid administrative routines, which agile practices might be compatible with and relevant for people's interactions as well as which types of problems can public servants tackle with an agile approach (Snowden, 2000). Public managers will then experience which affordances of agile practices are perceptible to public servants and whether they offer a direct link between perception and action. The current case has shown that while some affordances are perceivable to interviewees given that they have experienced them during some experimental settings to digitally transform administrative processes, most affordances remain hidden or false affordances—which is not surprising given that there was so far little exposure.

It remained unclear, especially for top and middle managers in this case what the applicability of agile is in their rigid bureaucratic environment that is focused on enforcing rules rather than experimentation. They reverted to commonplace pushbacks and were not able to perceive opportunities of agile: When is it considered as bending the existing rules, when is it acceptable to vary within discretionary boundaries, make exceptions, and then move the exceptions into the regular (Lipsky, 2010; Radoynovska, 2018). They considered agile

as a negative influence and potentially even as a threat to their role behavior and expectations toward setting the course instead of allowing self-organizing teams to divide up the tasks and come up with innovative solutions to organizational problems. In 1959, Lindblom called this process “muddling through”—iteratively by trial and error testing the way a problem could be appropriately handled (Lindblom, 1959). Agile is appropriate for those types of problems where a new practice needs to evolve and good or best practices are either not applicable or cannot be applied. The zero-failure culture that is demonstrated in the presented case does not allow for any bureaucratic discretion to adopt agile methods and tools or provoke intelligent failures that help the organization to learn. The case reflects Norman's (1988) assessment that perceived action possibilities in linear bureaucratic organizations remain limited.

For agile practices to be perceived as an opportunity, they need to be combinable with the existing administrative organizational routines and help to improve administrative work practices. Their fit with existing routines, culture, and context needs to be perceivable to civil servants, and in this case especially public managers (Feldman, 2000). In the current case, public managers were themselves not exposed to agile, and their self-efficacy, therefore, seems to be limited as they see it as a loss of control when they have the impression that their leadership style is questioned or they feel that their authority is undermined or replaced by agile teams (Uwadi, Gregory, Allison, & Sharp, 2022).

For affordances of new work practices to be perceived as opportunities, they need to be visible and communicable to the rest of the organization. This is specifically a challenge given the tacit nature of how work gets done in large bureaucracies: public servants draw upon tacit knowledge when they fulfill their tasks in practice without necessarily consciously thinking about it or being able to express their behavior (Hadjimichael & Tsoukas, 2019). It would require them to develop an awareness of the actions of other team members without explicitly calling attention to their agile work to develop an agile mindset over time (Costall, 1995). However, there is oftentimes low translucency or transparency of the visible details of organizational processes or functions that prevent learning across bureaucratic organizations (Bernstein, 2012). These tacit and rather implicit aspects of work are sometimes considered bureaucratic discretion but are not necessarily openly communicated for fear of retribution (Hadjimichael & Tsoukas, 2019). However, when it comes to changing organizational practices throughout the whole organization, the bureaucratic discretion to test out new ways of work needs to be visible, given that organizational culture has a procedural, symbolic, and evaluative nature. It would provide enabling opportunities for learning about agile experiences across departments.

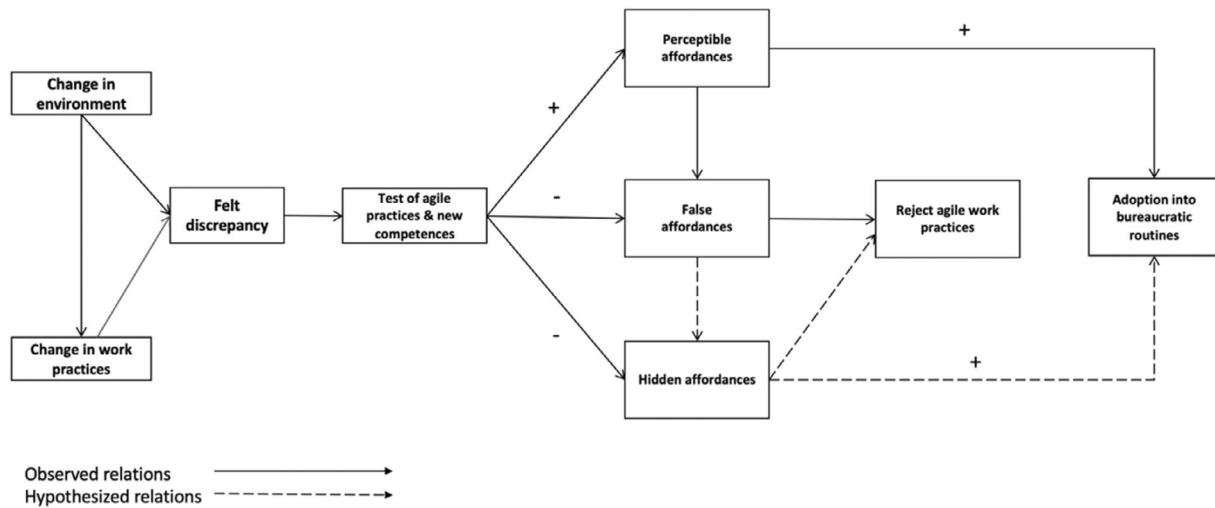


FIGURE 3 Theoretical model of social affordances for agile work practices.

Need to socialize agile affordances

The described socially constructed organizational culture of the bureaucracy that was studied in this case seems to be deeply challenged by the notion of agile work practices. The perceived challenges or unrecognized affordances might therefore immediately hinder even the recognition that agile could provide social affordances to civil servants (Costall, 1995). The absence of artifacts that support the psychological perception of social affordances is a major roadblock: visible artifacts of agile practices could serve as a discussion and conversation point in hallways or opportunities for working in the open. Colleagues do not have the opportunity to observe them or start to socialize with them, by asking questions and trying to draw comparisons to their own organizational or societal problems they aim to solve.

Among the obstacles to the social affordances of agile practices is that new work forms are fundamentally seen as undermining or “undoing” bureaucracy by questioning the role of formal authority (Mergel et al., 2021). Agile is seen as symbolic for pointing out failures or shortcomings of bureaucracy’s rigid formalized functioning which leads to straight-out rejection or false affordances. The emotional work in bureaucracies that is already been done is highlighted by pointing out that: “we are already agile” and thereby misconstruing agile as an adaptive mission that the public sector in general applies. While the adaptive form of operation has been part of the public sector’s DNA, it rejects agile project management frameworks that come with a new set of practices and a different type of mindset. Especially middle managers struggle with their role definitions and perceptions of self and professionalism in an agile project management structure (Annosi, Foss, & Martini, 2020). The loss of organizational control and formalization is difficult for middle managers such as department heads and they display a retreat to their

learned and trusted project management and decision-making practices, instead of adapting their leadership style to empower agile teams (Cardinal, Kreutzer, Chet, & Miller, 2017).

However, the opportunities of agile also relate to the fluid and adaptive environment that public administrations experience as part of the daily application of legitimate rules, aiming to remain impartial. The opportunities for personal engagement and empathy as part of bureaucratic discretion can be part of daily interpretation mechanisms (Margolis & Molinsky, 2008). Public administrations have the opportunity to move their organizations into enabling bureaucracies by forwarding the competence for decision preparation and making to agile teams rather than leaving it to the competence of the top tier.

The following theoretical model displays the above-described interrelationships and cognitive processes that might either result in the adoption or rejection of agile work practices (Figure 3):

CONCLUSIONS

Agile work practices do not appear out of thin air but have to be socialized and cultivated, similar to current bureaucratic, process-oriented work practices. As a result of the work presented here, we can therefore derive several propositions for future empirical tests to better understand the social affordances of agile government practices:

1. Emergent practices versus established highly institutionalized routines

Agile might harm learning and innovation in bureaucracies when its value is not perceived or when little is known or experienced (Annosi et al., 2020). Public

managers, therefore, need to have the opportunity to carefully assess whether agile is indeed adaptable to their existing routines which are part of their tried and trusted organizational culture.

Proposition 1. Members of bureaucracies with established administrative cultures and routines will engage in agile practices when the emergent practices are combinable with and applicable to their existing routines.

2. Understand the formation processes of administrative routines

It became clear that especially middle managers fear their relevance, role, and command. These sentiments resonate with the experiences of middle managers in large companies, who “charged with implementing such changes, they experienced intense confusion, as they thought of Agile as too vague to guide the managerial tasks associated with properly reshaping the intra-organizational boundaries.” (Annosi et al., 2020).

Proposition 2. Members of bureaucracies with established administrative cultures and routines are willing to experiment with agile practices when there is a clear leadership decision to form new organizational routines.

3. Necessity for socializing affordances

The case demonstrates that a “meanings void” occurs when established, dominant routines are no longer meaningful, but new routines are not yet formed to replace them. During times of transition, artifacts in the form of visible and communicable expressions of new ways of working are necessary for civil servants to understand how they might fit in with the existing routines or can be used in parallel for certain situations (Costall, 1995).

Proposition 3. Members of bureaucracies with established administrative cultures and routines will not engage in agile practices if the discrepancy to the actions and routines of the rest of the organizations is too large.

4. Assess administrative problems that can be solved with agile

Even though administrative problems are oftentimes defined as wicked problems (Rittel and Webber, 1973), not all problems that bureaucracies are aiming to solve are indeed of complex or even complicated nature. For many administrative problems, bureaucracies have

already developed proven and trusted ways to solve them through the existing best practices or administrative routines (March, 1991; Snowden & Boone, 2007). An example is the fast response to displaced refugees for which public administrations are able to exploit solutions developed for previous waves of refugees.

Proposition 4. Reviewing the types of problems and assessing which ones need agile problem-solving approaches and which ones can be solved through the exploitation of existing administrative routines might increase the social affordances and acceptance of agile work practices.

Transferability of the findings

The findings of this individual qualitative case study neither claim generalizability to other innovation work practices nor to all types of bureaucracies. However, in incidences where public administrations are planning to implement agile work practices and therefore a comparable empirical phenomenon is represented, the findings and resulting theoretical framework can provide a valid basis for additional research or for public managers aiming to transfer the findings to their own contexts (Geertz, 1973; Hellström, 2008; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). On a case-by-case basis, both researchers and practitioners need to assess whether the findings are situationally applicable to other municipalities or public administrations (Campbell, 1986).

To increase the reliability and replicability of the findings, the article includes a detailed description of the data collection steps and analytical measures (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013). Even if individual researchers might interpret the data differently, these procedures are aimed at increasing trustworthiness in the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data (Firestone, 1993; Maxwell, 1992).

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