

Latest trends in Top Public Management in the European Union



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Top public managers play a vital role in national developments. They take decisions that have a great impact on national policies and different stakeholders. They also have the role of employer for civil servants. All these responsibilities imply that they should acquire certain skills and competences as well as different support systems and employment conditions than those of other civil servants. This article examines different top public management models in the 27 EU Member States. It starts by grouping all European top public management systems in five models, and then follows the trends in employment and recruitment systems for top public managers and defines competences that are necessary for top managers in public administration. The article describes differences between management and leadership skills during the reform process in public administration, and illustrates main tendencies through some best practices in local, regional or national public administrations in Europe. It also looks at the representation of women in top public management positions.

Introduction

The top management of public organisations must balance the interests of every stakeholder, which include politicians, citizens and enterprises, and their employees. They have a role as policy-makers and as employers. They therefore need a vision and strategy, strong leadership competencies and people management skills, as well as political and environmental awareness. Each top manager has his or her own qualities, but in order to face global challenges, they also need the other members of the management team to use the qualities of others in the organisation in an effective and motivational way.

Top public managers (TPMs) should perform as leaders instead of just as managers, and must be able to bring movement and change to the organisation in a way that encourages employees to be part of the movement. For management this will mean strategic thinking and vision,

integrity and ethics, getting the best from people, making a personal impact, self-reflection for continued learning and improvement, focusing on the outcome, building relations, supporting teams, and creating shared understanding and values. In order to cover every competency required, top management has to operate as a complementary team.

Management team composition also requires special attention. Public sector organisations need a good balance of diversity at the top management level in order to face future challenges with an increasingly European and even international dimension. Necessary changes include a labour condition overhaul for a better work-life balance and better communication in more languages or with the help of multicultural tools/training. This will benefit everyone in the organisation, as well as society in general.

Who are top public managers and how are they managed?

Civil service managers play a vital role in national developments, thanks to their ability to acquire special leadership skills. As their profile differs to that of other civil servants, they need a different employment and support framework in which to work. Such a framework would guarantee their improved performance¹. In every Member State, the functional titles of top public managers and the number of functional levels for top public management positions differ. Nevertheless, nearly all Member States include Directors-General, Directors and Head of Departments in their TPM. The majority of Member States also include a Secretary-General. This article focuses on these positions.

Top public management systems in Member States can be grouped into *five* different models (see table 1). The models focus on such criteria as formal TPM status, centralised TPM organisation and special TPM conditions, as well as special support for TPM only, specific recruitment and appointment rules and benefits.

Table 1: Grouping of Member States by typology of SCS models

	Formal TPM status	No formal TPM status
Special conditions for TPM	No.1 With central SCS office: NL, UK	AT, DE, EL, ES, FR, LU, IE DK, FI, SE, SI EE, LV, SK
	BE, IT, MT, PL, PT, RO No.2	
No special conditions for TPM	BG, CY No.3	CZ, HU, LT No.5

Source: Kuperus, H. and Rode, A. "Top Public Managers in Europe" (2008)

Top public management model No.1 is '*centralised TPM organisation*'. This model suggests that top public management is formally defined in a national law or regulation as a separate and special group of civil servants and that this particular group is managed by a central office, which provides a support service for top public managers and administers the recruitment, management, remuneration, evaluation and promotion of TPM. In this model special conditions apply to top public managers which distinguish them from other civil servants.

TPM model No.2 is '*formalised TPM status with special conditions*'. This model suggests that top public management is formally defined in a national law or regulation as a separate and special group of civil servants, however there is no central office to administer and support top public managers. In this case TPM is usually administered by the same office(s) that administer the civil service in general. Furthermore, this model implies the existence of special conditions for top public managers which distinguish them from other civil servants.

TPM model No.3 is '*formalised TPM status without special conditions*'. This model suggests the same legal and administrative basis for TPM as model No.2, but top public managers do not enjoy any special conditions when compared to the civil service in general. The only difference between TPM and civil servants in general is their status.

TPM model No.4 is '*recognised TPM group with special conditions*'. This model suggests that top public managers are not formally defined in any national law or regulation, but that high-level civil servants' positions are considered an exceptional achievement and have a special social status. This particular group also enjoys special conditions in relation to their recruitment, appointment, support and benefits.

TPM model No.5 is '*no special TPM recognition or organisation*'. This model suggests that top public managers are not formally defined in any national law or regulation nor do they receive any special support or enjoy special conditions when compared to other civil servants. This basically means that top public managers' positions are considered equal to those in the civil service in general, so general civil service conditions and benefits must apply.

As can be seen from table 1, most of the Member States fit into models 2 and 4. This means that in order to fulfil their role, top public managers in most EU countries need special employment conditions that differ from those of civil servants in general. Only two Member States – the Netherlands and the United Kingdom – have created a special, centralised office for TPM management. A centralised office enables an organisation to pay special attention to the TPM group, to establish an 'esprit de corps' or corporate culture in the context of an autonomous organisation, to increase mobility between several ministries using a centrally-guided recruitment procedure and to organise specific support and development activities. This is especially useful in position-based systems. Overall, there is a general tendency in most Member States to move towards a more centralised way of managing top public managers. An example of this is the creation of the Top Level Appointments Committee, which selects candidates for almost all appointments at assistant secretary level in Ireland.

Employment systems and recruitment

Generally speaking, there are two types of employment systems – career-based and position-based. The career-based civil service system aims at building a coherent civil service with top executives who share the same culture, making working together and communication across government organisations easier. It also favours internal mobility. The main weaknesses of this system lie in the lack of competition for top positions, and the danger that senior civil servants on a secure career path that are part of a somewhat exclusive 'club', may eventually become too removed from what is going on in the broader scheme of things and the interests they are meant to serve².

The position-based civil service system aims to provide a wider choice of candidates, including those with specialist skills, to promote competition, cultural renewal and adaptation in the civil service³. This system facilitates decentralisation and makes it easier to adapt recruitment strategies to specific skill requirements. It also makes it easier to differentiate pay and other employment conditions in accordance with market value and facilitates a strong performance orientation⁴. The disadvantage of this system is the lack of planned career development for top public managers. Both internal and external candidates can compete for every position, so it is difficult to make a career development plan for these top managers. Another serious disadvantage of this system is the lack of a common, shared top management culture, which cannot develop due to ever changing managers, each

of them representing different ways of working and different organisational values.

Meanwhile, an increasing number of Member States are starting to combine elements of both these systems. They can be considered as mixed or *hybrid systems*.

In many Member States the recruitment procedures and career systems for the specific target group of top public managers differ from the general or main employment system. To improve their TPM, the Member States with a career-based employment system are moving in the direction of a position-based system for TPM positions. This would allow them to select candidates for short-term appointments on the basis of merit and performance and from outside the own organisation, corps or pool. Member States with position-based systems for TPM are tending to move elements of the system towards the career-based system, so as to ensure some kind of career path for their best employees and to strengthen the corporate identity of the group. Collective recruitment of young trainees or internal long- and shortlists of candidates for specific positions have been introduced and combined with open recruitment for external applicants for specific positions. The main differences between and trends in top public management-level employment systems are shown in table 2.

Table 2: Employment trends for top public managers

	Career	Hybrid	Position
In general	FR DE EL LU	BG LV SK SI LT >	CZ DK EE FI SE UK
Movement trends of TPM	AT, BE, PT ---> IE, RO, ES ---> CY -----> HU ----->	IT, MT < < PL CY HU	< NL

Source: Kuperus, H. and Rode, A. "Top Public Managers in Europe" (2008)

Based on the movement trends between TPM employment systems, it can be seen that Member States seem to be converging towards an increasingly similar, hybrid approach that combines elements of both basic employment systems. Member States with a career-based system are choosing to limit TPM selection based on duration of service, to increase the number of fixed-term contracts and appointments, to use performance assessments and to open top public management positions to external applicants with managerial skills and experience. Conversely, Member States with position-based and hybrid systems are willing to retain the best managers and to find a way of offering them excellent career prospects and in-service development. One new approach currently being used is creating different staffing pools with internal and/or external candidates for TPM where the best candidates for top management positions can be selected based on their competencies.

Competencies and leadership

The development of a shared vision and shared values is a pre-condition for effective leadership within an organisation.

Wherever possible, these values should be developed with all stakeholders involved and should be communicated and linked to other activities and tools in the organisation, especially to HR instruments, as competency profiles for TPM. The *main competencies* of a good leader can be summarised as:

- contributing to, shaping and championing the organisation's vision and goals;
- critically evaluating information before reaching conclusions;
- translating broad strategy into practical terms for others;
- creating a shared understanding of what has to be achieved;
- developing and overseeing the implementation of change in a fast-paced environment.

The competency framework is a list of competencies that are important for the organisation, but that can also be used to express the organisation's strategic focus and as a tool to assess and measure the organisational leaders' competencies⁵. About half of the EU Member States have a centralised competency profile for their top public managers; the rest focus on management training without a centralised competency profile. Table 3 gives an overview of Member States with a centralised TPM competency profile and also indicates their TPM management training courses, aside from entrance training. Nevertheless, this does not mean training is linked to the competency profile.

Table 3: Use of central competency profile and/or management training for TPM*

	Career	Hybrid	Position
Central Competency Profile	BE, PT	BG, IT, LV	---
+ management training*	CY, IE, RO	HU, SI	EE, NL, UK, SE
No central Competency Profile	EL, LU	SK	CZ
but management training*	AT, FR, DE, LT, ES	MT, PL	DK, FI

Source: Kuperus, H. and Rode, A. "Top Public Managers in Europe" (2008)

* Entrance training not included

To sum up the main competencies in top public managers' profiles (Table 4), most of the Member States have included some leadership elements in them or want to include these in the future, at least for the highest level. Many Member States mention people skills, but very few mention innovation, emotional intelligence and self-control, while none of them mention multicultural skills. The European dimension is also absent from most TPM competence profiles. Only a few Member States have included elements relating to languages and knowledge of European Institutions and Funds.

Table 4:
Grouping of Member States according to common elements in competency profiles*

Competences	EE, BG, IE, UK	RO, FI, NL, ES	BE, CY, IT, PT, SI
Leadership	Yes	Yes (except RO)	No (except BE, SI)
Strategic vision	Yes	No	No
Achieving results	Yes	Yes (except NL)	No
Communication	Yes	No (except RO)	No (except SI)
Managing relations, people, HRM	Yes	Yes	No (except BE)
General management	Yes	Yes	Yes
Knowledge	No	No	Yes
Awareness / sensitivity	BG, IE	NL	BE
Integrity / ethics	EE, IE, UK	NL	-
Judgement / decisional	EE, IE, EC	RO, NL	-
Innovation	EE	FI	-
Self-reflection / learning	UK	NL	-
EU-orientation	CY	-	SI
Diversity / multicultural	-	-	-

Source: Kuperus, H. and Rode, A. "Top Public Managers in Europe" (2008)

* Not all Member States included.

There are several ways to achieve the right TPM competencies. First of all, competency profiles could and should be used in the recruitment process to define the requirements for specific vacancies or group of positions at a specific level. Furthermore, competencies can be improved or developed through training and development activities for individuals or groups. But not all competencies can be developed and the organisation in charge of recruitment, training and development should know which of the required competencies can be developed and which are more basic personality characteristics (e.g. introvert/extrovert) and therefore can only be recruited. This distinction is especially important in career-based systems, where this aspect has to be taken into account when recruiting future managers at a very early stage of their career.

The leadership and management training courses offered in the majority of Member States are not always related to competency profiles. Most Member States train their top public managers in *leadership skills* and different types of *management skills*. Training and development activities are costly in terms both of money and TPM time. How effective these activities are for individual managers, as well as for the organisation, remains to be seen. Some Member States offer cross-border training courses, but more specific forms must be used to fit into the time constraints and specific learning and development needs of this group or these individuals. Sabbaticals can be used to spend a short while in public administration in another Member State or a European institution to increase the individual's understanding of the European setting, to develop multicultural skills and to build a European network.

Leadership and management of change

Managerial skills and qualities that were important during the past two decades are no longer sufficient to cope with future challenges; new competencies for the public sector management therefore have to be introduced. These days, top public managers are expected to be more performance-oriented and less process-compliant than those working in the civil service as a whole. They need managerial

focus, leadership skills and an innovation and communication-based focus, as well as professional competence. These competencies are a prerequisite for productive top management. Traditional values such as hierarchy, authority through position, conformity and the command-control paradigm are slowly going to transform into new cultural values within public administration. These new cultural values will include openness, transparency, efficiency, effectiveness, authority through leadership and managerial culture⁶.

In most of the European Member States organisational change processes are generally still oriented to management rather than leadership⁷. In Scandinavia, the Netherlands and Anglo-Saxon countries, where New

Public Management was introduced some time ago, the reforms focus more on leadership in terms of the way that values, self-reflection and soft motivation skills are being developed. They focus on sustainable change, which means a real change of culture and common values and investment in a change process over a longer period of time. They mostly present real concepts of strategic vision and provide a long-term orientation process. Nevertheless, the focus on Europeanisation and multicultural skills for managers and the diversity in management teams is still lacking.

In other public sector traditions (Continental, Mediterranean and East European) they focus more on changing structures or implementing new tools and staff training programmes, without an overall vision on changing organisational cultures and fundamental values. The changes focus on specific parts of an organisation and not the organisation as a whole, thereby suggesting that Member States still favour a management approach rather than a leadership approach in public administration reforms. There is a risk that change may not be embedded - it is only partial (in the structure of the organisation, not in its values). Therefore, in the case of a political change, mobility of management or a short-term crisis and a reduction of resources, the change process will be easy to influence and will result in delays to the reform process.

Examples of real change and leadership were demonstrated among the European Public Sector Award (EPSA) 2009 nominees⁸ (see the case boxes).

A Swiss police force has introduced a 'change through methaethics' initiative aiming to develop a process of reflection among police officers of any rank and in all divisions, enabling the best possible decisions to be made, even in increasingly complex and risky environments. In this process traditional modes of management and leadership were questioned, resulting in a real change of values and culture in the police force. Change was measured through an internal staff survey, which gave showed encouraging results: about 90% of the employees said they were proud of the police force. Also the people of the city rated the police force much more highly than in any previous annual survey.

Change has been achieved in a London hospital on the basis of such components as developing a culture in which the staff feel valued and everyone understands the organisation's goals, creating a leadership development programme for all managers and monthly performance management meetings across the entire organisation. It resulted in increased efficiency, extra income and patient satisfaction, which are the main issues in any public health organisation.

Sustainable change is being implemented in the municipality of Porto through training oriented towards continuous self-improvement. This turns managers into leaders that drive change and stimulate employees to be responsible for managing their own talent, thereby becoming agents of real and sustained change. The training focuses on such concepts as values, mission, vision and customers.

In public sector leadership there is always a strong connection between administrative and political leaders. This often makes it difficult for sustainable, long-term reforms and change to be effected, because the political and administrative systems function in a way that supports short-term actions rather than a strategic long-term vision. There is a risk that, in times of political and/or economic change, the reform process will stop or be realigned. One possible solution for dealing with political issues in public management is a clear agreement between politicians and top public managers for the long-term development and/or introduction of a supporting and monitoring institution to verify the sustainability of the changes made.

One of the EPSA 2009 nominees targets the issue of cooperation between politicians and top public managers



In the local government of San Cugat, politicians and top public management have reached a strategic agreement to re-orient the prevailing traditional political culture and to encourage a public management style based on objectives and effectiveness. This has promoted a political culture where good policies are based on good resource management.

in the local government of San Cugat city in Spain (see case box).

The problem, especially in the East European Member States, is that leadership and change processes are often interrupted by frequent changes in the country's political climate. It is therefore essential to prevent the politically-motivated appointment of administrative leaders, so that leadership and policy can become continuous and sustainable. On the other hand, in most Continental and Mediterranean Member States the reforms are too one-sided and focus only on effectiveness and efficiency, while little attention is paid to cultural and ethical values and soft (non-financial) motivational skills. In times of economic downturn and resource scarcity, public organisations cannot invest more money in financial bonuses to motivate their

The Danish Immigration Service has transformed from an institution with a very bad public reputation into an entirely customer-oriented organisation, by changing the organisation's culture and values completely. The main source of inspiration for top public managers was the 'Public Governance - Code for Chief Executive Excellence in Denmark' developed by the Forum for Top Executive Management as a joint management project for senior managers across the Danish public sector. A decisive element in the transformation process was that management focused on communicating the goals and values in a credible way, as well as achieving conformity between corporate values and management decisions and actions. Stakeholder confidence rose considerably between 2006 and 2008 and negative exposure in the media saw a marked drop. The customers clearly appreciate the transformation efforts: an extensive customer survey shows that between 65% and 90 % of customers were satisfied or very satisfied with the level of service.

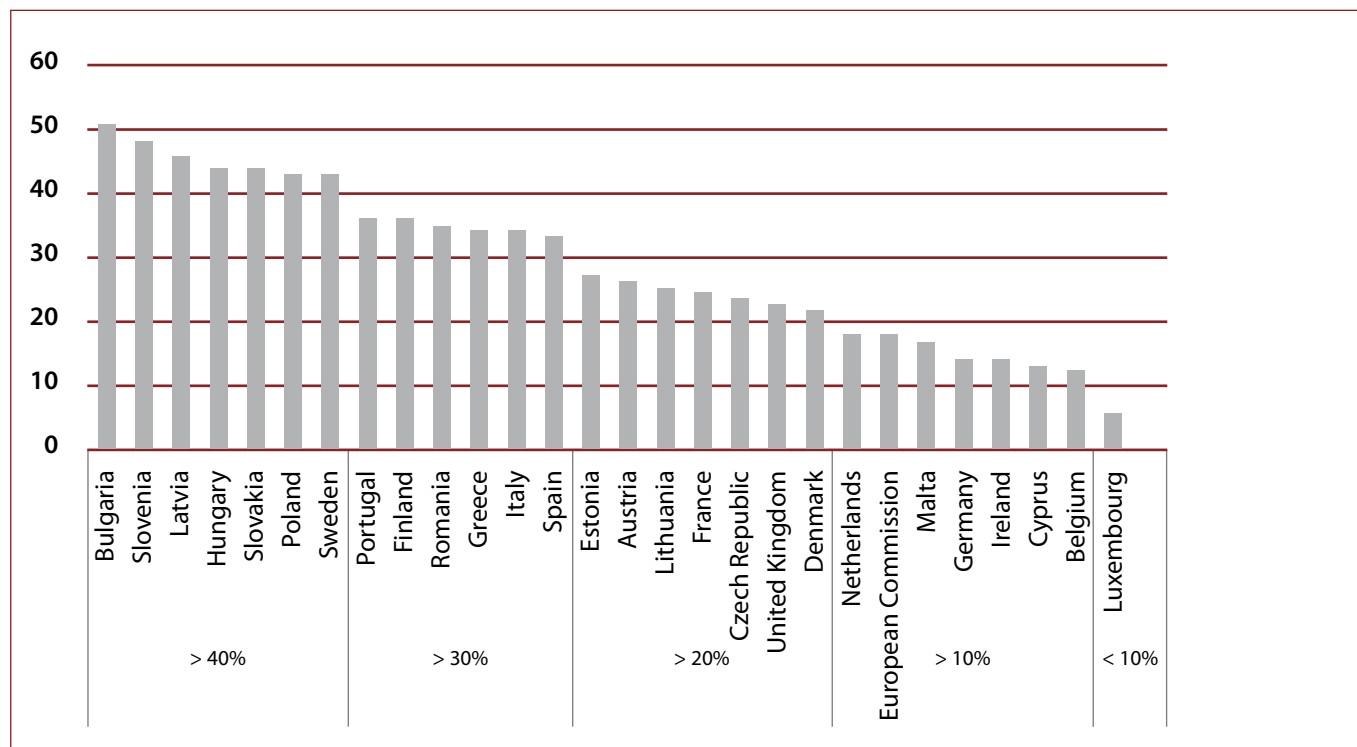
staff; public sector values ought to be motivation enough. Financial motivation works well for achieving short-term results but it does not motivate staff to work towards long-term goals.

Working conditions, work-life balance and women in top public management positions

The key factors that contribute to a good work-life balance are the length of the working day and week, flexible working hours and sympathetic leave conditions. Standard working hours, the amount of overtime, autonomy with regard to working hours and opportunities to work part time and at home (teleworking) differ between Member States. For cultural or organisational reasons, flexible working arrangements or leave do not apply to TPM level positions in several Member States or are not allowed in practice. This may be one of the main reasons why women are still underrepresented in the highest management positions. In the Continental, Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian Member States in particular, female representation in TPM positions is very low. In contrast, six of the seven countries with the best gender balance (in which over 40% of the highest civil service positions are held by women) are Member States that have joined the European Union since 2004 (see figure 1).

In all Member States⁹, the representation of women is higher in level 2 (deputy) positions than in level 1 (the highest) positions. This suggests that Member States not only have to focus on the general number of women in top public

Figure 1: Proportion of female civil servants in highest-ranking positions*



Source: European Commission, DG EMPL, Database on decision-making women and men (Data collected between 19/02/2008 - 13/03/2008)

* This includes the civil servants in the two highest-ranking positions (posts of Director-General, Deputy Director-General, Director and Principal Advisor, or equivalent).

management positions, but also have to look at the positions women actually hold and try to ensure equality there as well.

The reasons for these differences in the representation of women among EU Member States are to be found in the historical and cultural background and organisational tradition of the country concerned, as well as the employment system. For example, in many Eastern European Member States the public sector is regarded as female dominated, whereas in countries where the participation of women in the labour market has traditionally been low (e.g. Ireland and the Netherlands) it takes longer to get more women in senior civil service positions.

In many career-based systems, female representation in management positions is low due to the general recruitment competition at entry level. The competition is the same for male and female applicants, but where women are not equally represented at entry level they certainly cannot be equally represented in higher positions, as recruitment for TPM positions takes place through career progression. For this reason, opening up TPM positions also to external applicants could be a way of recruiting more women to management positions.

In order to achieve equal or high representation of women in TPM positions in position-based systems, the issue must be addressed by setting certain targets as part of national policy. However, some Member States, such as Denmark, see equal treatment as a very important criterion in the recruitment process, so specific targets or quotas for female representation cannot be set. In other Member States, quotas have been, are being or will be used to increase the number of women in top positions. Specific

training, mentoring and coaching are also used as ways to support women in their career. The question is whether it is appropriate to temporarily treat some groups or individuals 'unequally' by giving them extra support, so as to achieve the ultimate goal of equal opportunity.

Conclusions

With national policy-making gaining in complexity and becoming increasingly exposed to international and European coordination, as is the case in all EU Member States, there is an even greater need for top public managers to have a broad perspective and the ability to coordinate their work with national, European and international institutions. In this regard, the EU context and development of multi-cultural skills should be emphasised and included more in the competency frameworks and the training and development activities for top public managers. New ways of developing TPM in a more structured way have to be found, taking into account their responsibilities and

Top public managers (TPM) should perform as leaders instead of only as managers, while being able to bring movement and change to the organisation in a way that encourages most of the employees to want to be part of the movement.

time restrictions. Given the importance of the European environment of public administration, more emphasis should be placed on this dimension in the future. The development of leadership skills is still important in many Member States in order to add long-term strategic thinking and team and people management to the management competencies. To lead permanent change, top public managers have to develop into top public leaders.

Long working hours are still the norm for top management positions, whilst telework or flexible working

time arrangements are still rare. Consequently, establishing flexible working arrangements that help reconcile professional and private life should be allowed also in higher and top management positions so as to enable more women to take up top positions. Another valuable stimulus is a well-designed parental leave system. In the countries with a long-established leave system, it is generally not part

of the organisational culture to allow TPM to benefit from these working conditions. The main problem continues to exist, because women or men who are taking care of a child or family often thereby limit their chances of promotion or career development. This is one of the elements that will have to be considered throughout the EU. Political support for changes in this area is essential.

NOTES

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- ⁴ Rexed, K., *The Pros and Cons of Career- and Position-based Systems*; presentation at “Good governance for development in Arab countries” initiative; Rabat, 24 - 25 May 2007.
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- ⁶ Pagon, M., Banutai, E., Bizjak, U., *Leadership Competencies for Successful Change Management*, a preliminary study report, commissioned by the Slovenian Presidency of the EU, 2008
- ⁷ This analysis is based on the empirical data from: Kuperus, H., Rode, A., “Leadership and Management for Change” in Prohl, M., Heichlinger, A. (ed.) *Taking the Pulse of European Public Administration. Key Findings of the European Public Sector Award 2009*; EIPA: Maastricht, 2009
- ⁸ Empirical data from: Kuperus, H., Rode, A., “Leadership and Management for Change” in Prohl, M., Heichlinger, A. (ed.) *Taking the Pulse of European Public Administration. Key Findings of the European Public Sector Award 2009*; EIPA: Maastricht, 2009
- ⁹ Based on statistics from: European Commission, DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, data 2008 on gender balance in decision-making positions in national administrations; See at: <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=775&langId=en&intPagelD=666>