

Stewardship in Public Sector Management: A Systematic Review of Its Impact on Public Trust and Service Delivery

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Abstract: *This systematic review examines the role of stewardship in public sector management and its impact on public trust and service delivery. Stewardship, characterized by responsible and ethical governance, is increasingly recognized as a critical component for enhancing public sector performance. This study synthesizes findings from various reviewed articles, government reports and case studies to assess how stewardship practices influence public perception and service outcomes. The review identifies key stewardship dimensions, including accountability, transparency, and stakeholder engagement, and evaluates their effect on trust-building and the efficiency of service delivery. Results indicate a positive correlation between robust stewardship practices and increased public trust, leading to improved service accessibility, quality, and satisfaction. The study highlights best practices and offers recommendations for policymakers to strengthen governance frameworks, thereby fostering a sustainable trust-based relationship between public institutions and citizens. This research contributes to the broader discourse on public sector reforms and underscores the significance of ethical leadership in achieving societal goals.*

Keywords: *Stewardship, Public Sector Management, Public Trust, Service Delivery, Accountability, Transparency, Ethical Leadership, Stakeholder Engagement, Public Sector Reform, Resource Sustainability, Citizen Participation, Public Administration, Policy Recommendations, Service Quality.*

Introduction

Leadership and Stewardship" for Public Service explores how stewardship can build public trust by promoting transparency, accountability, and ethical governance within public institutions. "Public Service Excellence in the 21st Century" edited by "Baimenov and Liverakos", provides a comprehensive overview of stewardship as a long-term commitment to public good. It highlights how stewardship involves careful management of both tangible and intangible public assets, emphasizing intergenerational fairness and sustainability [1]. "How Organizations Build Trust" discusses methods for assessing and improving trust in public institutions through stewardship. It emphasizes the need for public sector leaders to foster openness, responsiveness, and ethical conduct, which are key to restoring and maintaining public trust [2]. Public sector management plays a crucial role in ensuring that governments effectively deliver services that meet the needs of their citizens. In recent years, the concept of *stewardship* has gained prominence as a governance framework that emphasizes ethical leadership, accountability, transparency, and the responsible management of public resources. Unlike traditional bureaucratic models that often prioritize rules and procedures, stewardship focuses on values-driven governance, fostering trust between public institutions and citizens while enhancing service delivery outcomes. Public trust is a foundational

element for the legitimacy and effectiveness of government institutions. When citizens trust their government, they are more likely to comply with laws, participate in public initiatives, and support reforms. Conversely, a lack of trust can lead to societal discontent, reduced civic engagement, and challenges in service delivery. Therefore, understanding how stewardship influences public trust and service delivery is critical for policymakers and public sector leaders seeking to improve governance and societal outcomes. This paper aims to systematically review the impact of stewardship on public trust and service delivery across various public sectors, including healthcare, education, and infrastructure. By synthesizing findings from existing literature and real-world case studies, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How does stewardship in public sector management affect public trust?

RQ2: What are the key elements of stewardship that enhance service delivery?

RQ3: What challenges hinder the implementation of stewardship practices in public sector governance?

The findings of this review will provide valuable insights into how stewardship principles can be integrated into public sector

management to foster trust, improve service quality, and ensure sustainable development. This research also aims to offer practical recommendations for policymakers to strengthen governance frameworks, ultimately bridging the gap between public institutions and the communities they serve.

I. STEWARDSHIP THEORY

“Stewardship Theory was first introduced” by “James E. Davis in 1991” [3] as an alternative to agency theory. Davis proposed that, in contrast to the self-interest model of agency theory, managers (or stewards) in an organization are inherently motivated to act in the best interest of the organization and its stakeholders [3]. This theory emphasizes trust and collaboration between leaders and those they serve, with the primary goal of ensuring the long-term success and sustainability of the organization or public service.

In the public sector, stewardship theory has been particularly valuable in discussions about governance and public sector management. It advocates for public sector leaders to prioritize public interest, transparency, and long-term goals over short-term personal or political gains.

Key concepts of stewardship theory in the public sector include:

“Public Interest over Personal Gain”

“Davis, Schoorman, & Donaldson (1997)” :

Public sector leaders are expected to prioritize the well-being of society and ensure that resources are used efficiently for the benefit of all stakeholders. Stewardship theory emphasizes for the Ethical Resource Allocation are ensuring that funds, facilities, and services are directed to the most critical areas, particularly in underserved regions and Long-term Planning are leaders focus on sustainability, avoiding short-sighted policies that prioritize immediate political gains over enduring societal benefits.

“Intrinsic Motivation” “Perry & Wise (1990)”:

Unlike the profit-driven motivations in the private sector, public servants under stewardship theory are driven by values such as loyalty, integrity, and a commitment to public service.

“Trust-based Leadership” “Schillemans & Busuioac (2015)” :

Effective stewardship requires a leadership style based on trust, transparency, and collaboration with the public, which ultimately fosters greater public trust and satisfaction with government services. As transparency, leaders focus on sustainability, avoiding short-sighted policies that prioritize immediate political gains over enduring societal benefits and as collaboration, engaging communities in decision-making fosters inclusivity and shared ownership of outcomes.

II. RESEARCH METHOD

To conduct a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) on Stewardship Theory in the Public Sector, the research method involves several systematic and transparent steps to ensure a thorough synthesis of existing literature on how stewardship affects public trust and service delivery. In a **Systematic Literature Review (SLR)**, **inclusion and exclusion criteria** are essential to ensure the selected studies are relevant, reliable, and aligned with the research objectives. The Eligible Criteria for an SLR on

Stewardship Theory in the Public Sector:

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic Relevance • Systematic reviews, meta-analyses, empirical studies, and theoretical papers • Published on 2014-2023 • Written in English • Methodology qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods studies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Irrelevant Topics • Non-Scholarly Sources • Language Limitation • Outdated Research • Methodological Weaknesses

INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION CRITERIA OF THE STUDY

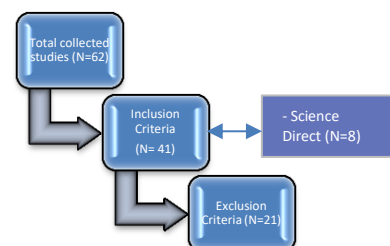
Inclusion Criteria, defines what types of studies will be *included* in the review based on relevance, publication type, language, date range about 10 years (2014-2023), and research methods. Exclusion Criteria, specifies what types of studies will be *excluded* to maintain focus and quality. These criteria ensure the review is comprehensive, unbiased, and relevant to the research questions.

SEARCH STRATEGY

Perform a systematic search across multiple databases such as Google Scholar, Sage Journal, Research Gate, and Science Direct. The search should include both keywords (e.g., "stewardship theory", "public sector trust", "public service delivery") and Boolean operators (AND, OR).

STUDY SELECTION PROCESS

After conducting the search, studies are screened for relevance by reading titles, abstracts, and full texts against the eligibility criteria. Out of the 62 studies, 35 studies are selected that meet the inclusion criteria, which likely focus on Relevance to stewardship theory in the public sector, alignment with the research questions and studies that directly contribute to answering the research questions are retained, 27 studies are excluded based on exclusion criteria, irrelevance to stewardship or the public sector, poor quality and redundancy or focus on unrelated fields like corporate governance. This process demonstrates how the studies are systematically filtered to ensure relevance, quality, and alignment with the research objectives.



III. RESULT

Stewardship in public sector management has a significant impact on public trust, primarily because it emphasizes ethical leadership, accountability, and participative governance. There are key ways stewardship affects public trust:

1. Ethical Leadership Builds Confidence is leaders adopted stewardship prioritize the welfare of the public over personal or political interests. This ethical behavior fosters trust as citizens perceive their leaders as responsible and transparent. Studies suggest that ethical decision-making, fairness, and integrity create a perception of legitimacy in governance, reducing skepticism among citizens.
2. Transparency Enhances Credibility Stewardship practices involve open communication, disclosure of decision-making processes, and sharing information with stakeholders.
Transparency helps build trust as citizens feel informed and empowered to hold leaders accountable for their actions.
3. Participative Governance Increases Engagement In stewardship, citizens are often involved in policymaking processes, either through consultation or collaborative decision-making platforms. This inclusive approach strengthens trust by showing that leaders value public input and act in the collective interest.
4. Accountability Reduces Corruption Stewardship requires leaders to act as stewards of public resources, ensuring accountability in their use. Proper checks and balances, along with clear responsibility for actions, can reduce corruption and misuse of power, leading to higher trust in public institutions.
5. Evidence from Research Empirical studies maintain that stewardship principles, when implemented in public institutions, result in greater compliance with public expectations, leading to increased trust.
6. The concept of stewardship in public sector management, specifically its relationship with public trust and service delivery, has been discussed in several key academic works [4]
7. This study examines the challenges of contract management in public-private partnerships and how stewardship approaches influence public sector efficiency. While specific stewardship-related quality assessments are discussed indirectly, their work provides insights into the trust-building mechanisms in public governance contexts. [5]
8. The key elements of stewardship that enhance service delivery in the public sector are deeply rooted in principles of accountability, ethical leadership, trust-building, and collaboration. These elements collectively contribute to improved efficiency, transparency, and stakeholder satisfaction. Below are the primary elements:
 - Accountability and Transparency are ensures that public resources are managed responsibly and that processes and decisions are open to public scrutiny. Transparency

reduces corruption and inefficiency, creating a service-oriented culture in the public sector.

- The kind of Ethical Leadership are leaders who prioritize ethical decision-making and the public good set the tone for an organization’s values. Ethical leadership aligns organizational goals with public interest, reducing wasteful practices and enhancing trust.
- Participatory Decision-Making are engaging citizens and stakeholders in governance ensures that services align with actual needs and priorities. Participation fosters co-creation of solutions, leading to higher satisfaction and effectiveness in service delivery.
- Trust and Relationship Building are trust between public officials, service providers, and citizens is central to ensuring compliance, cooperation, and satisfaction. Trust reduces transaction costs, minimizes conflicts, and enhances collaborative implementation of policies.
- Long-Term Commitment to Public Good are stewards prioritize sustainable development and equity over short-term gains or political benefits. This commitment ensures equitable access to services and long-term improvements.
- Adaptive and Collaborative Governance are flexibility in governance allows public institutions to adapt to changing societal needs and challenges. Collaborative efforts between governments, private sectors, and civil society enhance innovation and resource optimization.

Implementing stewardship practices in public sector governance faces various challenges, many of which stem from structural, cultural, and institutional barriers. Below are some key challenges identified in academic literature and practical case studies:

- Bureaucratic Resistance to Change
- Lack of Leadership Commitment
- Inadequate Training and Capacity Building
- Cultural and Institutional Constraints
- Accountability vs. Flexibility Trade-Off
- Corruption and Mismanagement
- Limited Resources
- Political Interference
- Technological Limitations

Resolving these barriers requires a multi-faceted approach, including institutional reforms, robust training programs, citizen engagement strategies, and investments in technology to support transparency and accountability.

IV. DISCUSSION

The discussion provides a detailed analysis and synthesis of the key findings from the systematic literature review of how stewardship principles impact public trust, enhance service delivery, and face challenges during implementation.

1. Stewardship fosters trust by emphasizing ethical leadership and transparent governance [40],[43]. Leaders acting as stewards prioritize the collective interest, creating trust within the organization and with external stakeholders. Studies show that when public officials

behave ethically, citizens perceive public institutions as more reliable. Stewardship encourages participatory governance, where citizens and employees are included in decision-making processes [41]. This inclusivity builds trust by demonstrating accountability and responsiveness to public needs.

2. Leaders who adopt stewardship principles inspire employees to align their goals with organizational missions, resulting in efficient and innovative service delivery [42]. Stewardship practices focus on the sustainable and equitable use of resources, ensuring that services reach intended beneficiaries without wastage. By fostering a culture of trust and mutual respect, stewardship practices encourage feedback-driven service improvements, enhancing the quality and accessibility of public services.
3. The absence of ethical and visionary leadership limits the potential for stewardship to thrive. Leaders must model steward-like behavior to embed these practices successfully. Public sector outcomes based on stewardship principles, such as trust and collective well-being, are harder to quantify compared to traditional performance metrics [40]. Embedding stewardship requires structural reforms, capacity-building initiatives, and anti-corruption measures to ensure that public servants are empowered and trusted to act in the public interest.

Finally, this article has been concerned with Governments should invest in leadership development programs that focus on ethics, transparency, and collaborative governance, Institutions need to address bureaucratic hurdles by promoting decentralization and fostering a culture of innovation, further research should explore the long-term impact of stewardship on trust-building and its adaptability across different cultural and institutional contexts. Stewardship in Public Sector Management must provide a detailed analysis and synthesis of the key findings from the systematic literature review, explaining how stewardship principles impact public trust, enhance service delivery, and face challenges during implementation.

V. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that applying stewardship principles in public sector management significantly impacts public trust and the quality of services delivery. By emphasizing ethical leadership, transparency, accountability, and active stakeholder engagement, stewardship fosters confidence in public institutions. This increased trust directly contributes to enhanced accessibility, quality, and citizen satisfaction with public services. Furthermore, stewardship promotes the alignment of organizational goals with public welfare, encouraging a collaborative and trust-based governance framework. The key elements of stewardship, including ethical leadership, participatory decision-making, accountability, and a long-term commitment to the public good, play a pivotal role in driving efficiency, transparency, and inclusivity. These components not only streamline operations but also foster deeper stakeholder involvement, creating a sense of shared ownership and responsibility in governance processes. As a result, citizens perceive public institutions as more reliable, responsive, and aligned with societal needs. However, implementing stewardship practices is not without challenges.

Bureaucratic resistance to change, limited resources, and political interference often hinder the seamless integration of stewardship principles into governance frameworks. Additionally, the complexity of measuring outcomes like trust and collective well-being poses difficulties for policymakers striving to institutionalize these practices. Addressing these barriers requires robust reforms, including leadership development, capacity building, and structural adjustments to ensure the sustainability of stewardship in public governance. By highlighting these dynamics, this study underscores the importance of ethical leadership and participatory governance in achieving social goals and sustainable development. It makes a significant contribution to public sector reform discourse, advocating for a shift from hierarchical, control-based models to collaborative, trust-centric approaches. Such reforms are essential for fostering stronger relationships between public institutions and citizens, ultimately leading to more equitable and effective service delivery systems.

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