

Keynote speech by Ms Loes Mulder (NL), Director-General, Office for the Senior Civil Service, Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations

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I always wanted to be a civil servant. Or a politician, but I wasn't brave enough for that. The quality of a civil service is an indicator of economic growth. The OECD has fascinating statistics on that. Moreover, contributing to democracy, the rule of law, justice, it makes the people in a country happier. Education, infrastructure, health, there are multiple ways to contribute to society, being a civil servant. But how does one become an excellent civil servant? And how do civil services perform the best they can?

I would like to thank EIPA for the EPSA-initiative. It helps public sectors in Europe to learn from each others best practices, by making them documented, validated and transparent through EIPA. I congratulate the finalists here today, for their extraordinary contribution to the delivery capacity of the European public sector. And therefore their contribution to our nations' public service delivery and I am glad that in a formal conference setting the most important people of the public sector are here: the people who work in our fields, in practice.

My thesis is that our current complex societies and international context, dictate that we have to learn from similar countries. With similar countries I mean countries that enjoy being a democracy and stand for the rule of law. (Today's public administrations face numerous challenges which appear to be increasingly intertwined, cross-jurisdictional, and less predictable. Globalization, the fast pace of technology, the impact of demographic and societal changes and the shifting values of an increasingly diverse population, all challenge public administrations to respond

to the needs of the populations they serve. And this is occurring within the context of post-economic crisis fiscal consolidation and public sector downsizing. This fast changing world requires organisations to innovate, to use a diverse range of competencies to meet citizens' expectations and to promote often tailor-made solutions for citizens and other stakeholders.)

As the director-General for the senior civil service in the Netherlands, I am particularly interested in public leadership. We can try to think of the best ways to select and develop our leaders on our own, but we could also learn from other countries and of course our international institutions like the European Commission.

And we already know a few things.

We need leaders that are aware of their flaws and their talents, and who are eager to learn and adapt to new circumstances. We need leaders that are willing to cooperate instead of strengthening their own power position. We need them to show integrity, cooperation, self awareness and agility. We need them to show a longterm vision on short term disasters.

We've seen the French leadership after the Paris attacks. Hollande is definately not a civil servant, but he showed leadership in his speech in the evening of November 13th. And we all know that the people enforcing that leadership WILL be civil servants. Police, military, social workers, teachers, the civil service at large will have to adress the problem of extremism in our contries. And ofcourse we can not do so in isolation.

Public administration is facing shifting demands on leadership and collaboration. There will be a need for inspirational leadership to change thinking patterns and promote acceptance for change and identification with the administrations' goals.

Leadership, much more than before, should address emotions and win the “hearts” of the employees and public. So-called soft skills, such as sensitivity and other personal competencies, will be much more needed in the future to foster good relationships between leaders and employees, as well as leaders and their stakeholders. A change in leadership skills is also required to promote diversity inside organizations to respond to the needs of diverse customers and /or citizens.

Governments need a well-functioning civil service to realise their policy programme and to reinforce public trust. Civil servants are being asked to solve complex and multidimensional problems for populations who are increasingly diverse in their needs and their expectations. At the same time they will likely be required to take more autonomous decisions, be more responsible, accountable, performance-oriented, and to listen and provide high quality service, while ensuring equal treatment and the rule of law. How do we become such super civil servants?

Besides from leadership, we can learn from each other’s experiences in IT-projects, countering terrorism, fighting unemployment, every subject relevant to the civil service and society. It is a waste of time, money and effort not to share our harsh lessons. Each civil service knows it’s failures and each civil service should share it’s lessons: first, internally, second with international peers. Our world and our challenges are simply too complex to try and solve them alone.

Sharing the lessons, and our best practices, will make us stronger in solving issues that public services face. This regards themes of today, like counter-terrorism, but also the way we work in selecting and developing our leaders. This can not be a task of central governments alone. We need to ask our cities, our decentralised, local public services and our agencies what they need to perform well, and, ofcourse, the theme of today, contribute to a better society.

The difficult part is, that we as senior civil servants love to act, make rules, change systems and simply: intervene. While sometimes doing less is the better solution.

The question is what response works when. I love the fact that EIPA helps us in stimulating organizations to share their succes and lessons. Therefore I am not only happy to be a civil servant, I am also happy to be here. Let's have coffee, and go to an exciting break, and find out who wins this EPISA award.