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Managerial roles of Ontario college presidents

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Abstract

This study examined the managerial roles of college presidents at the tertiary level within the province of Ontario, Canada in an effort to understand the importance of their position at the apex of their educational institutions, as well as, reveal and substantiate the challenges faced by them within the context of the twenty-first century. In particular, the study aimed to identify the extent to which the new public management ideologies, that impacted over the past decade the area of higher education, influenced their managerial roles. Moreover, there are reasons to believe that the findings of this study will help the Board of Governors in making hiring decisions in the future, as well as, determine if training is required for the candidates chosen for such position. The research model used was based on Mintzberg's taxonomy of managerial roles. The study used a mixed research methodology for providing answers to the proposed research questions.

Keywords: Higher education, managerial role, college presidents, role theory.

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1. Introduction

The Ontario higher education system is the largest in Canada, consisting of 18 universities and 24 colleges of Applied Arts and Technology (CAAT). These figures do not take into consideration the private sector which consists of 500 career colleges, according to the Ontario Ministry of Colleges and Universities. While universities are offering programs leading to undergraduate and graduate degrees, the Ontario's CAATs provide a wide range of post-secondary education and training programs which complement universities' educational offerings, contributing significantly to the economic and social development of the province. Private career colleges add to the above abundance of instructional possibilities a wide range of training opportunities, focusing mostly on business and computer technology programming, aesthetics and hairstyling, trucking and welding programs.

According to the Canadian Constitution, higher education is treated as a matter of local (provincial or territorial) interest (Constitution Act, 1982, s 93). As a result, an exclusive jurisdiction has been granted to provincial governments to develop, control and monitor the higher education legislation, policy development and regulation. Notwithstanding this, the federal government still plays an important role by being actively involved in the areas of provincial funding transfers, student financial assistance, support for research, tax measures and support for individuals' saving for an education. The proposed study will examine these dynamics and their impacts on the roles of Presidents in Ontario community colleges by answering the following questions: a) What managerial roles do Ontario community college presidents emphasise the most?; b) What are the main challenges that Ontario college presidents face as a result of the new public management ideologies that have impacting the field of higher education for the last two decades or so? and c) What executive styles do college presidents embrace the most in order to deal with the existing challenges? The information collected will help policy makers and leaders within educational institutions and government in understanding and adjusting for the changing nature of higher education.

The present study is expected to be the first modern study about the role of the Presidents in Ontario community colleges. The study aims at completing an important part of the Canadian higher education sector puzzle where notable are the contributions of Boyko (2009) study which tried to identify the roles and responsibilities of the associate deans in Canadian universities, and David's (2011) which tried to determine the most emphasised managerial roles by the academic deans in Canadian universities, as well as, the main factors impacting on their executive behaviour.

2. Literature research

To fully understand the roles, responsibilities and challenges of college presidents, it is necessary to situate the present study within existing literature while addressing the limitations to existing studies. There has been a lack of scholarly attention paid to the role of the president, particularly in community colleges, in the past few decades or so. It is very hard to provide a reasonable explanation for the lack of scholarship on this topic. One plausible explanation is the lack of access to presidents, or perhaps their unwillingness to participate or share information about their work. Whatever the case, this lack of information about the role of college presidents and the challenges they face in the twenty-first century, particularly in the light of the new public management ideologies that has impacted the field of higher education around the globe, has left a significant gap in the literature and constitutes one of the reasons this study was written.

Notwithstanding that, some efforts have been made to shed light on the roles, duties, responsibilities and challenges faced by the mid and upper level management in universities and colleges around the world. In this respect, Segall (2007) observes that in the last decade or so all education leaders seem to understand the importance of a more market-oriented, student-centred and business-like management/accountability strategies, while preserving their academic mission, focus and values. Adding to this, there are new world players—India and China—that have emerged as education provider powerhouses (Group of Eight, 2007).

Gourley (2007) acknowledges, also, that there has been a seismic shift in higher education as a result of it embracing the unprecedented opportunities offered by the global technology-fuelled society. One of the major impacting factors enabled by advances in communications and information technology is that of globalisation through the mobility of ideas, capital and people. In this new context, in her opinion, new roles for higher education providers are emerging, such as fundraising and industry liaison, among others. Mortenson (2012) predicts that in the United States, for example, the funding for higher education will disappear by the year 2059. The explanation for such an outcome, according to McLendon, Hearn and Mokher (2009) rests with the 'partisanship, legislative professionalism, term limits, interest groups and gubernatorial power influence appropriations levels' (p. 705).

Around the world, noticeable studies have been conducted by a number of scholars from the so-called Duoro Seminar. In North America, particularly in Canada, there are two notable recent studies though they did not focus on community college governance platforms. Both studies examine the roles and responsibilities of deans in Canadian universities (Boyko, 2009; David, 2011), in an effort to ascertain whether these functions have changed in rhetoric or in fact as a result of the new managerialist paradigm that has penetrated both the higher education systems and public institutions worldwide. Both studies confirm the expectations and suggest that the Canadian post-secondary education system has been affected, slightly, by new public management ideologies.

The evidence presented in the literature reveals the lack of scholarly attention paid to the upper management level of the college governance structure, both around the world and in Ontario. The present study fills this gap in the research by exploring the changes that have occurred within the Canadian higher education context, as a result of the factors previously mentioned, in particular the NPM philosophies, and outlines the extent to which these new ideologies have impacted the college presidents' roles, as well as the new challenges they are facing. In order to understand the nature of the managerial roles adopted and emphasised by community college presidents, it is important to understand the context in which they conduct their daily activities, namely higher education. The specificity of the context can be attributed to a number of factors. These factors are: the duality of organisational structure—the simultaneous existence of an administrative and academic hierarchy (Maassen & Vught, 1994); the existence of professionalism and specialisation—existence of dual allegiance, i.e., first to the discipline and second to the institution (File, 2000); existence of blurred levels of organisational responsibility and control—having knowledge intensive production processes that require decentralisation and fragmentation of decision-making power (Clark, 1983); and the existence of goal ambiguity—post-secondary institutions try to be all things to all people (File, 2000).

Community college presidents are actors in a managerial role that has to meet the expectations of a plurality of stakeholders. Defining managerial roles is rooted in Barnard's (1938) theory of cooperative behaviour and his interest in executive behaviours. Three distinct schools of thought have emerged as a result of Barnard's contribution: the institutional school represented by Selznick (1957), the decision-making school represented by Simon (1947) and the human relations school represented by Mayo. Even though Carlson (1951) is credited with the first classical work about executives' behaviour, the first modern study of executive behaviour is attributed to Mintzberg (1973) who analyses the activities of five Chief Executive Officers (CEOs).

Describing the life of a CEO, Mintzberg claims that on daily basis: a) managers are processing large, open-ended workloads under stringent time pressure; b) managerial activities are relatively short in duration and fragmented; c) managers are preferring action and action-driven activities disliking monitoring and paperwork related activities; d) managers use verbal communication widely and frequently; e) managers are maintaining close relationships with their immediate subordinates and sometimes external parties and f) managers' involvement in work execution is rather limited.

Mintzberg, also, analyses individual manager's use and mix of the ten roles according to the six work related characteristics. He identifies four clusters of independent variables: external, function related, individual and situational. He concludes that eight role combinations were 'natural'

configurations of the job: 1. contact manager—figurehead and liaison; 2. political manager—spokesperson and disseminator; 3. Entrepreneur—entrepreneur and negotiator; 4. Insider—resource allocator; 5. real-time manager—disturbance handler; 6. team manager—leader; 7. expert manager—monitor and spokesperson and 8. new manager—liaison and monitor. Mintzberg's study on the 'nature of managerial work' unmasks many managerial myths requiring reconsideration, such as replacing the 'aura of reflective strategists carefully planning their firm's next move' with one of 'fallible humans who are continuously interrupted'.

2.1. Role theory

For the purpose of this study, role theory offers a good middle ground between the rigid structuralism and ambiguous constructivist or postmodern approaches. Furthermore, looking at role theory from an organisations point of view provides a singularly useful arena for the development and application of role theory. Walker et al. (2000) posit that successful presidents 'assume leadership responsibility, curriculum planning and development, staffing, evaluation and budgetary administration' (p. 132) besides being committed to fulfilling other listed duties such as program assessment, development of partnerships among internal and external constituents and deploying conflict management skills. Bragg (2002) answers the 'good president' challenges by proposing six core knowledge areas that are, in his opinion, sine qua non conditions to success. They include the following: a) knowledge of the mission, philosophy and history of the institution, b) learner-centred orientation, c) instructional leadership, d) information and educational technologies, e) assessment and accountability and f) administrative preparation. All of these knowledge areas are not expected to remain constant over time, but continue to evolve. Bragg (2002) also states that presidents are expected to 'possess democratic leadership, creative management and finely tuned human relation skills' (p. 75). It is evident that presidents need to be multi-skilled as well as possess a plethora of knowledge in many areas. Robillard (2000) provides a few insights into the responsibilities facing those managing academic affairs. Exploring the duties of the community college president outlined in Vaughan's (1986) study, Robillard describes how the nature of these duties vary due to the wide scope of activities, resource constraints, and the differing responsibilities within each institution. According to Vaughan (1986), in order to deal with such role and goal ambiguity, managers of academic affairs should have experience in dealing with administrative and supervisory activities when they come into the role of the president.

Despite the importance of the president's position, very little preparation is usually given to newly appointed upper level managers in the context of higher education provider settings (Person, 1985). One of the most plausible reasons for this lack of preparation is the fact that the managerial roles within the community college system have not been studied much in recent years. As a result, the role ambiguity factor sometimes leads to poor managerial performance, inefficiencies in the system, and wasted institutional resources.

According to Singh and Rhoads (1991) there are four forms of role ambiguity: a) ambiguity about the scope of one's responsibilities; b) ambiguity about the behaviours necessary to fulfil one's responsibilities; c) ambiguity about role senders' expectations and d) ambiguity about the effect of one's actions on the attainment of one's goals, the role set and the organisation. Organisational theorists claim that upper level managers' behaviour is very important to the health of the institution. With little or no information about their position, some newly appointed presidents can easily become victims of the systems. According to the College and University Personnel Association (1991), it is reasonable to believe that job dissatisfaction could explain at least some of the early resignations or poor work performances.

2.2. Role mapping

According to Mintzberg (1973), a manager's job can be described within three different categories of roles, namely, informational, interpersonal and decisional. In terms of informational roles, the manager is expected to act as a monitor, disseminator and spokesman. As a monitor, the manager is constantly scrutinising the external environment for more information and data with respect to the latest developments. Internally, the manager is constantly in contact with their subordinates looking to obtain both solicited and unsolicited information that is helpful in the managerial context. As a disseminator, the manager is expected to circulate the gathered information, passing it on to the responsible parties within its control unit. As a spokesperson, the manager is expected to release information to other parties outside of their control unit.

In terms of interpersonal roles, the manager is expected to act as a figurehead, a leader and a liaison. As a figurehead, the president is expected to perform some ceremonial duties that may include graduation ceremonies, academic appointments and other work-related festivities. As a leader, the manager is supposed to assume responsibility for the work exerted by the people under its command. While there are presidents of all ranks in many different areas of education and in many types of collegiate institutions, most people see the president as having a single trait: the ability to be a leader. Within the leadership role, the college president needs to 'perform service, be accountable, fulfil a moral role, act as a steward, build diverse communities with trust and collaboration and promote excellence' (AACTC). Moreover, as a liaison, the president should build and maintain contact outside the vertical chain of command.

With respect to the decisional roles, the president can act as an entrepreneur, disturbance handler, resource allocator and negotiator. As entrepreneurs, the president should seek to improve their control unit from all perspectives—financial, teaching and human resources—by providing a clear vision and articulate advice to its employees. As disturbance handlers, the presidents are expected to react promptly and offer solutions to problems resulting from situational pressures. As resource allocators, the presidents are supposed to properly decide how to fairly and equitably allocate all the resources among the members of its control unit. As negotiators, the presidents are expected to commit organisational resources in a real time. These roles are continuously changing as the environment in which the presidents conduct their daily activities does. To fully understand these roles, it is necessary to, finally, analyse the responsibilities presidents are expected to fulfil. Responsibilities are the specific tasks or duties that actors, college presidents in our case, are expected to complete as a function of their roles.

Analysing a number of recent job postings for the position of college president from major job search websites where community colleges place career ads such as www.monster.ca, www.eluta.ca, ca.indeed.com, it is evident that Mintzberg's taxonomy is useful as a framework for the present study since community college presidents seem to be responsible for activities that are usually credited to high level executives in business organisations such as: a) developing, implementing, effective, progressive and community responsive college philosophies, and providing leadership that align with the college mission, vision and strategic outcomes; b) represent the college in all official functions to communicate with ministry and serving community; c) pursue areas of funding that will help maintain the financial stability of the institution; d) approve all important business transactions of the college to ensure the integrity of the system and provide accountability reports to the Board of Governors; e) hire and recommend for termination personnel of the college; f) maintain academic integrity of the university by providing direct oversight of policies, procedures, personnel and admission standards; g) review, evaluate and approve special admission and life experience application materials; h) maintain communication with students, faculty and the community through public speaking engagements, publications, presentations and seminars; i) provide opportunities for professional development activities for faculty, staff and students; j) develop and implement operational strategies and procedures and k) review and evaluate operational procedures and establish procedures and guidelines for information technology acquisition and supervise staff.

These responsibilities for college presidents seem to tie in very well with Mintzberg's taxonomy of managerial roles. College presidents should not only be considered business executives, they should also consider themselves as such. It must be noted that the majority of college presidents have adopted the title of CEO, a fact that clearly demonstrates their inner beliefs regarding what their job requires of them. CEOs, in the general sense of business, face many challenges. Externally, CEOs by nature of their position need to attend many shareholders meetings, get in contact with investment industry analysts, and keep close contact with company board members, industry groups, regulators and politicians. Internally, CEOs need to stay in contact with their internal constituencies to ensure that the business continues to run smoothly because ultimately they are responsible for company results and achievements. CEOs need to communicate relentlessly, listen and gather valuable information. Effective CEOs use their presence ubiquitously to actively communicate and shape how all constituencies think about their organisation. CEOs are expected to pay great attention to the relationship with the Board of Directors since it is the only constituency that can fire the CEOs and is the final arbiter of whether the CEOs are balancing, as well as, meeting the vast array of expectations placed on them.

As a result, using Mintzberg's taxonomy of managerial roles for determining community college presidents' academic leadership effectiveness seemed to be proper way to continue with the study. It is worth noting that Mintzberg's taxonomy has been proven appropriate for studying the behaviours of business executives around the world, over the years, in many studies. See, for example, Shapira (1980); Kanter (1982); Konrad et al. (1997); Hall and Tolbert (2009); and Lunenburg and Ornstein (2012).

3. Methodology

The analysis of the existing literature has revealed the fact that in order to understand whether or not the NPM ideologies have impacted the Canadian field of higher education, it is important to determine what the most emphasised managerial roles by the community college presidents are (first research question), what the main challenges influencing their executive behaviour are (second research question) and how college presidents have managed to deal with existing challenges (third research question) in order to achieve high level of efficiency and effectiveness in their position.

Determining these aspects significantly contributes to the existing body of knowledge pertaining to upper level management executives' behaviour, particularly in the field of higher education, while also serving to fill in some of the existing gaps in the research literature. Having detailed the theoretical framework and gaps in the literature pertaining to the present work, before directly answering the research questions listed above regarding the roles, special challenges and changes related to community college presidents in Ontario, it is useful to set out the research methodology and corresponding research methods deployed in this study. Providing pertinent answers to the present thesis's research questions required the use of an adequate research design and methodology.

For developing a rich and comprehensive understanding of the presidents' changing roles and responsibilities, the research design adopted was a mixed methodology; quantitative for answering the first research question and qualitative for answering the second and third research questions. For the quantitative part of the research, an online survey has been used to gather data. The online survey has been structured and developed around the Mintzberg taxonomy of managerial roles framework. Determining the most emphasised roles adopted by the Ontario college presidents required the use of descriptive statistical measures as part of the data analysis. To answer the second and third research questions, as well as to provide a better understanding of who the college presidents are, what challenges they face and what executive managerial styles they undertake for being successful in their work setting, the study used a qualitative approach. The qualitative part of this research study was developed using the case study research method.

4. Findings

The quantitative data analysis of the information gathered in the study revealed that: a) the majority of the presidents (67%, $n = 7$) who participated in the study were males; b) the age of the majority of the participants (67%, $n = 6$) was between 50–59 years old; c) the majority of the participants (67%, $n = 6$) held a Vice-President position prior to their presidency term; d) with small exceptions, the majority of them have a master's degree (67%, $n = 6$); e) the majority of presidents have had at the time of interview over 11 years of managerial experience (67%, $n = 6$ between 11–20 years of managerial experience while 22% , $n = 2$, over 21 years); f) with one exception, all the presidents worked in English speaking post-secondary institutions; g) half of the participants worked in urban colleges (56%, $n = 5$) while the rest in regional ones and h) with one exception, all participants worked in CAAT's. Moreover, the findings disclosed the fact that the most emphasised activities (highest frequency rates) by the college presidents were the following: 'maintain a network of contacts and information sources outside the School', 'develop good interpersonal relations with personnel outside the College', 'represent the college to outside groups', 'participate in a variety of symbolic, social and ceremonial activities such as speaking at convocation or banquets', 'participate in a variety of symbolic, social and ceremonial activities such as attending convocations and banquets', as well as, 'feel obligated to perform a number of routine duties of a ceremonial or social nature such as meeting institutional guests'. At the same time, the least emphasised activities (lowest frequency rates) by the college presidents were 'resolving problems that develop with other institutional units', 'put a stop to misbehaviour within or outside the College', as well as 'schedule your own time and approve various authorisations within academic affairs'.

The results of the qualitative data analysis were very detailed and aligned with the previous findings from the quantitative data analysis in the sense that they not only supported, but also enriched the understanding about college presidents' background. In this respect, it was observed that 'being president' is described by the study participants as quite challenging; maintaining a proper balance of work within a bureaucratic, constantly demanding, environment where fiscal issues, dealing with different constituencies such as staff, faculty and the Board of Governors, for example, and at last but not least, dealing with student challenges, demands a lot of efforts, aptitudes, capabilities and skills.

While college presidents seem to deploy different management styles, the present research suggests a number of things. First and foremost, it is evident that college presidents tend to be males above 50 years of age with graduate degrees and previous experience in management. They also tend to agree that their jobs require a diverse skill-sets, though they emphasise their roles as figureheads, liaisons, spokespersons and entrepreneurs over their roles as resource allocators, negotiators and disturbance handlers. This is consistent with their self-perception that their general position is shifting towards, or ought to shift towards, the role played by CEOs in the private sector. This suggests that in relation to emergent changes, not least of which is the shift towards NPM policies, is one in which Ontario college presidents are increasingly emphasising business leadership behaviours. That being said, the qualitative research, while it demonstrates some variety with regards to leadership style, also indicates that presidents of Ontario colleges are satisfied with their positions and display a sense of dedication to the community as well as a certain passion for higher education. In this sense, while they are responding to current and emerging changes by taking up a more corporate style of management, it is likely that they are motivated by the success of their institution insofar as it provides a genuinely useful and meaningful service to the students.

5. Conclusions

According to the results of this study, the job of post-secondary college presidents has become more managerial in nature in the light of the most frequent activities and roles emphasised by presidents in Ontario. In this respect it can be concluded that the role of the college president has also become more complex, requiring a lot of skills and abilities that are needed to deal with daily

challenging situations within their work setting. Moreover, the study suggests that part of the post-secondary college presidents' success rests with their capacity to develop and maintain a large work-related network of relationships that eventually can be deemed helpful when the situation requires. As educational leaders, post-secondary contemporary college presidents in Ontario understand the importance of the market-oriented, student-centred, business-like management and accountability tactics. Acting like figureheads when sharing the academic mission, institutional focus and values with external audiences or when looking for external support, whether pecuniary or not, college presidents of today acknowledge that their job has become very complex and demanding in terms of skills, knowledge, and abilities.

In stark contrast, college presidents tend not to act as disturbance handlers or negotiators since they consider these roles as not important or relevant to what they consider is expected of the position they occupy. To them, the activities associated with these roles are at the bottom of their managerial concerns, as they feel more like embracing the mantra of 'college CEOs'. It is very hard, almost impossible, to judge college presidents' performances in the office since there is not much material and evidence in the research literature about academic leadership effectiveness to support or substantiate an educated opinion. The reason for this lack of information can be traced to the fact that the literature on higher education is rather self-contained, making little cross-references to the leadership theory. The present work serves as an attempt to bridge this gap in knowledge. The position that college presidents hold, as suggested by the research, is very complex and demanding. Reaching high levels of efficiency and effectiveness in this position is an on-going process that entails a lot of experiential learning, good mentorship, adequate professional development, as well as previous pertinent managerial experience.

Being a president is not easy and irrespective of their backgrounds, whether academic or not, college presidents face similar difficulties in their job with respect to bureaucracy, staffing, students needs and requirements, dealing with the Board of Governors, and internal resistance to change. Discussing their relationships with the Board, college presidents confessed that in spite of the fact that in majority of cases the relationship is a positive one, there were circumstances where the relationship was dynamic and stressful. On the other hand, the most enjoyable aspects of being a president revolved around interacting with students, participating in the first day of school and graduation ceremonies, as well as everything dealing with being capable of making a positive change in students' lives. Making these kinds of changes comes at a price and college presidents seem to be aware of that especially when they get ready to conform to the new challenges such as corporatisation, fundraising, entrepreneurship, institutional partnerships with industry, community, private organisations and intergovernmental relations posed by the changes in the system, as well as challenges stemming from the external environment.

College presidents believe in the future of community colleges in Ontario, though they foresee a couple of changes that are going to cause difficulties sometimes in the near future. Those changes consist of diversification and partnership, a shift that may lead to a decrease in the number of colleges. Regarding their personal future, college presidents are focused on either embracing another career or continuing to work with community and colleges in different roles/positions. Based on the findings of this thesis, it is evident that college presidents do really enjoy their work, overall. In order to explain this, it was important to delve deeper into the soft aspect of their managerial make-up. In this respect, it was ascertained that college presidents are very much motivated by social factors, by the daily challenges, willingness to make institutional changes as a result of external environmental factors, and system changes, as well as the urge and will to make a positive difference in others' lives. This kind of drive is supported by their working philosophy that, in general, involves aspects related to giving back to the community, providing high quality education to students, and creating a great sense of accountability for all stakeholders.

The findings of the present study reveal, also, the fact that college presidents approach both internal and external environmental changes and challenges in a different way. Six distinct executive

styles have been determined: diplomatic, collegial, distributive, consultative, collaborative and inclusive. The executive styles have been classified based on two criteria: level of managerialism and degree of consensual decision making. Here, a couple of conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, there is not one prescribed way of dealing with demanding situations in terms of college presidents in Ontario. Rather, presidents have personal ways of approaching them. Secondly, the approaches taken by college presidents are possibly the results of a mix of different factors such as personality, personal beliefs and convictions, academic education, and other background elements (age, gender, education level etc.) Thirdly, circumstantial factors can be considered another influential and determining element in college presidents' attitude and executive behaviour. Whatever the case, it is worth noting again that although the presidents' attitudes and behaviours do vary, they are all responding to the increased managerialism and corporatisation within their institutions and generally speaking they all tend towards a general belief that their position is akin to a CEO in the private sector. As a result, it can be concluded that college presidents behave differently, and the reason for that is simply the fact that when doing it so, they adopt whatever style fits or comes rational, natural and simple to them, though as noted, there are certain patterns to their behaviours.

The contribution of this study to the existing body of knowledge about the upper level management is important for a number of reasons. First and foremost, the present study contributes to filling the existing gaps in the literature outlined above and provides a nuanced view regarding the managerial roles, executive behaviour and challenges that currently confront, Ontario college presidents. Second, the study establishes the fact that the managerial roles of upper level management in Ontario community colleges have been significantly impacted by the new public management ideologies, which seems to be correlated with a rise in the self-perception of the presidents' role within their institutions. Third, the study reveals the fact that the existence of new public management ideologies is reflected in the challenges that the college president is routinely facing in their work setting. Answering these challenges in a professional and adequate manner may require different executive styles to be adopted. Fourth, the study provides a new taxonomy of management executive style based on level of managerialism and degree of consensual decision-making parameters.

Overall, this study establishes, for the first time in the Canadian higher education literature, that not only the mid-level management in tertiary educational institutions are affected by corporatisation, but also the upper level management. This confirms that maintaining both financial viability and academic vitality within the setting of new public management and corporatisation is a top to bottom approach. This fact aligns with the existing management science body of knowledge, which considers the previously mentioned approach as the expected one.

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