

Understanding Oneself in Local Government: Exploring the Role of Self-Awareness in Informal Leadership Development

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Abstract: This paper draws attention to the implicit leadership understandings and informal leadership development practices of mid-level public servants who fulfill essential bridge-building functions connecting the administrative and political realms in local government. The study emphasizes the sense of leader identity expressed by these individuals within the context of their long-term development of leadership practices aided by self-reflection and self-study practices. While mainstream leadership theories have added self-awareness and related concepts to desirable leader competencies, these ideas actually point well beyond individualistic competency frameworks. Based on multiple, in-depth interviews with chiefs of staff and department directors in a municipal context, the results suggest that these individuals hold relatively traditional leadership understandings, while also utilizing self-reflection as cognitive space to process work and life events. It supports critical leadership studies emphasizing how leader identity evolves over the long-term and is shaped in relational contexts creating spaces for individual leadership practices. Self-study practices can create favorable conditions for individuals to understand their own needs, develop more productive relationships with others, and consider their own position within a broader context of shared practices within organizational settings.