

6. Trust reforms in Scandinavia: assessments of adoption and impacts of trust-based management in public sector organizations

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PUBLIC MANAGEMENT REFORMS IN HIGH-TRUST SOCIETIES

The Nordic countries are active and pragmatic public management reformers (Greve et al., 2020). They have large public sectors financed by high taxes, and many services are provided by public sector organizations. The Nordic countries are small, unitary states and have election systems with proportional representation (Knutsen, 2017). These factors explain why the Nordic countries have the motivation to utilize the resources spent in the public sector as efficiently as possible and the opportunity to decide policies and implement reforms that are incremental but still persistent and relatively coherent over time (Hood, 1995). The effect is that the Nordic countries are pragmatic but active public management reformers.

The Nordic countries are high-trust societies. In this respect, trust has been described as ‘the Nordic gold’ (Andreasson, 2017). Trust is commonly explained as someone accepting to be vulnerable to depend on the competence, benevolence, and integrity of others to do something as expected without being fully able to monitor or control the other’s actions (Rousseau et al., 1998). Trust, therefore, involves risk, but the benefit may be reduced costs to control and possibly also speedier decisions and better utilization of local competence, something that may be especially useful in decentralization in big and complex organizations and in organizations with many professionals. Trust-based management may, therefore, be especially relevant in public sector organizations that often are big, complex, and professionalized, in countries with a big public sector and even more so in high-trust societies such as the Nordic countries, which also have big public sectors.

The Nordic countries are successful welfare societies. The Nordic countries are commonly ranked high on issues such as low corruption, transparency, government effectiveness, trust, employment, equality, and innovation (Fukuyama, 2015; Rothstein, 2011; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010). The many incremental reforms in public management and society at large over a long time may be one important explanation for the development of these successful welfare societies. Trust may also be an important explanation for the development of these successful welfare societies as well as being an outcome of such societies.

The three Scandinavian countries, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, are currently implementing trust reforms (Bentzen & Bringselius, 2023). Trust reforms involve using trust as a design principle in governance more, or more explicitly than before, in designing and implementing trust-based management – also called trust-based leadership or trust-based governance – in public sector organizations. Trust-based leadership is defined as ‘leadership aimed at building and facilitating trust as an organizational resource, enabling the distribution of autonomy and decision-making, which in turn allows for increased task complexity and innovation’ (Bentzen, 2023, p. 2256). Building on and utilizing trust and decentralization in management and leadership is an old phenomenon (Davis et al., 1997; Drucker, 1946; McGregor, 1960; Six & Sorge, 2008) but the Scandinavian trust reforms emphasize using trust as a design principle in management and leadership possibly more than before (Bentzen, 2018; Bringselius, 2018). This phenomenon, therefore, is interesting and relevant also for the other Nordic countries and beyond.

This chapter describes and discusses the content of trust reforms, the adoption of trust-based management, the impacts of trust reforms, and the assessments of such trust reforms, after more than ten years since the first trust reforms were launched. The chapter uses data from a survey of trust reform in the City of Oslo as a case to illustrate the discussion. The analysis shows that trust reforms have many elements that relate to traditional public administration, new public management, and new public governance. Hence, the adoption of trust reforms is more an act of rebalancing common management practices than introducing something radically new. The analysis, furthermore, shows that many perceive the adoption of trust-based management as related to above-average organizational performance, but our analysis shows that the assessments of the adoption of trust-based management and organizational performance are also related to other factors such as general trust and point towards the idea of trust-based management. One important implication from the analysis in this chapter is, therefore, that many people who are involved in trust reforms may perceive trust reforms and organizational performance positively, but their assessments may be affected by other factors than the adoption of the reform and the relationship to organizational performance only.

The next section outlines trust reforms in the Nordic countries. The third section analyses assessments of trust reforms, using the City of Oslo as a case. The final section discusses the results and concludes.

SCANDINAVIAN TRUST REFORMS

The OECD statistics for trust in government from 2020 show that all the five Nordic countries had significant trust in government (OECD, 2020). Finland is often ranked highest and Iceland lowest among the Nordic countries in terms of trust in government. It is likely that trust has been important in public management reforms in both Finland and Iceland as well, but it is the three Scandinavian countries that have adopted trust reforms systematically so far. At present, there are no available, comparable statistics on the diffusion of trust reforms to all tiers of government in all the Nordic countries, but case studies (Bentzen, 2019b, 2019a, 2023; Elmersjö & Sundin, 2021; Klemsdal & Kjekshus, 2021; Vallentin & Thygesen, 2017), surveys (Johnsen et al., 2022; Siverbo et al., 2024), and some government reports (DFØ, 2023; SOU, 2019) indicate that many public sector organizations in the three Scandinavian countries have been experimenting with and adopting trust-based management in the last decade, especially in local government.

The Scandinavian trust reforms are based on public discourses of excessive red tape and detailed control, lack of empowerment, as well as a need to strengthen user orientation, cooperation, and co-production with external stakeholders. The concept of trust reform comes from a national trust reform initiated in Denmark in 2011, but the first national reform has been criticized for not making much impact generally (Bentzen, 2019b). The City of Copenhagen, however, undertook experiments with de-bureaucratization, decentralization, and collaboration, which eventually became known as trust-based management (Bentzen, 2018). The Danish government and some municipalities have later adopted trust reforms and trust-based management, albeit with different names. The idea of trust reform soon spread from Denmark to Norway and Sweden (Bentzen & Bringselius, 2023).

In Norway, in particular the Labour Party and the Socialist Left Party, together with some labour unions, endorsed the idea of trust reforms to strengthen work autonomy and to reverse the liberal and conservative parties' policies of contracting out and user choice. The City of Oslo has probably had the most systematic and well-known adoption of trust-based management in Norway so far. The new red–green coalition city government, which took power in the City of Oslo after the local election in 2015, had proclaimed trust reform to be an important policy to replace parts of the new public management-inspired policies and practices of the former conservative–liberal coalition government, which had ruled the city for 18 years. The new national

Labour Party–Centre Party coalition government, which formed after the national election in 2021, also proclaimed a trust reform, much modelled after the experiences in the City of Oslo, which it started to implement in 2022.

The Swedish government established in 2016 a government delegation to study the idea of trust-based governance and help government organizations to experiment with trust-based management (Bentzen & Bringselius, 2023). The delegation was in operation until 2020 and published several white papers (SOU, 2017, 2018). The Swedish government did not initially adopt a national trust reform, as in Denmark and Norway, but the idea of trust-based management was nevertheless influential and many public sector organizations, especially local governments, experimented with the idea and adopted more trust-based management (Siverbo, 2022).

Trust, and hence trust-based management, are often perceived to be valuable and desirable for vertical as well as horizontal trust. If trust reforms have positive impacts on de-bureaucratization and trust between managers and employees, empowerment and work autonomy, organizational performance, and trust in institutions, we can expect further diffusion of trust-based management beyond the three Scandinavian countries.

There are also, however, challenges in implementing trust reforms. Notably, trust and trust reforms are ‘magic concepts’, which means they have broad scope, great flexibility, and positive spin (Pollitt & Hupe, 2011). Reforms in general are also often ‘hyped’ and mean that factual outcomes disappoint many (Aberbach & Christensen, 2014). Moreover, for managers and employees, accepting more trust may be a ‘poisoned chalice’ because more trust also involves more responsibility, for example, making hard choices, following up on negative behaviour and poor performance, and taking unpopular decisions. Many managers and employees therefore hesitate to accept more trust, making trust reforms hard to implement (Bentzen, 2019a). Finally, trust involves risk and trust and control need to be balanced (Möllering, 2005). In everyday parlance, many perceive trust and control as opposites and hence believe that trust reforms should aim at reducing control. Such a perception may be dangerous, however, because public management often deals, for example, with vulnerable clients, basic infrastructure, and security. Meaningful control is important for effectiveness as well as fairness and reliability (Hood, 1991). Trust-based management requires competence, benevolence, and integrity, which means adequate resources are necessary. If any of these are missing, trust without control may infuse increased risk and less trust in public management and institutions. Besides, decentralization, empowerment, and work autonomy have been commonplace for a long time, at least in the Nordic countries, and therefore the objective need for general trust reforms may be questionable (Brorström, 2022). More knowledge on these issues is important to understand

how magic concepts such as trust reforms (Bentzen, 2019b) are conceived, adopted, and assessed.

TRUST REFORM IN THE CITY OF OSLO

A red–green coalition government won power in the City of Oslo in 2015 and started the implementation of a trust reform with four districts piloting trust-based management models in home care services for two years (Eide et al., 2018). The piloting showcased that trust-based management is not one model and that decentralization and empowerment in trust-based leadership have to be accompanied by trust-based control to safeguard fiscal prudence. The City Council eventually abolished the use of the term trust reform but adopted trust as the fundamental principle in the management of the city in 2017 (City of Oslo, 2017).

Here, we shall utilize data from a survey which addressed all the politicians in the City Council and the 15 district boards, all managers and employees in the home care services in 14 of the 15 districts, and all managers and employees in 38 of the approximately 180 primary and secondary schools in the city. These two sectors are interesting because they employ many professionals and are often the largest sectors in the municipalities. They constituted about 73 per cent of all the 51,000 employees in the City of Oslo in 2019.

The survey was conducted electronically early in 2021 and received 1,097 responses with a response rate of 18 per cent. In this chapter, we use the data from 648 respondents who were knowledgeable about the trust reform in the city and had complete responses. Of the 648 respondents, 72 per cent were employees, 11 per cent were frontline managers, 7 per cent were higher-level managers, and 10 per cent were politicians.

All the questions were posed as statements where the respondents replied according to their level of agreement on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = totally disagree/not at all/far below average, 7 = totally agree/to a very large extent/far above average), except for general trust, which was measured on a ten-point scale from 1 to 10.

Elements in Trust-Based Management

The City of Oslo delineated nine elements that should characterize the adoption of trust-based management (City of Oslo, 2017). Some elements concerned reducing the control burden from detailed reporting and control, improving the relevance of the information flows for decisions, and digitalization. These elements can be labelled as measures for improving mainly traditional public administration (TPA). Other elements aimed at reducing the number of objectives and making the objectives more unambiguous, increasing user

orientation, and increasing professional autonomy. These elements can be labelled as measures for improving mainly new public management (NPM). Finally, some elements aimed at improving collaboration vertically between management and employees, horizontally between colleagues, and internally as well as externally by more open and better communication. These elements can be labelled as measures for improving mainly new public governance (NPG). In sum, the elements of trust-based management concern vertical as well as horizontal trust.

The formal document of the City of Oslo did not use the terms TPA, NPM, or NPG, however. Given that trust-based management concerns using trust as a design principle, this principle nevertheless has to be applied to all the relevant management practices that have been put into use in public sector organizations after many decades of evolution and reform involving TPA, NPM, and NPG.

To assess the factual adoption of trust-based management, we asked the respondents to evaluate the changes in the nine elements over the three-year period from 2018 to 2020, following the formal decision by the City Council in 2017. Overall, the adoption seems to have resulted in more empowerment, measured as increased professional judgement and independent decisions, and to some degree more citizen-oriented digital services, especially in home care services and possibly triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020–2021. For the other elements, there seemed to have been modest changes and improvements.

Organizational Performance

Public services can be assessed by many criteria and perspectives (Boyne, 2003b). We replicated a research instrument for measuring organizational unit performance (Van de Ven & Ferry, 1980) and asked the politicians, managers, and employees to assess their unit's performance relative to comparable organizations on issues such as quantity, quality, innovation, reputation, goal achievement, and effectiveness of the services provided. The politicians in the City Council assessed the performance of the whole organization, the politicians in the district councils assessed the performance of their districts, and the managers and employees assessed their units' performance relative to other home care service units or schools for four elements: quality; innovation; goal achievement; and effectiveness.

Two issues were striking from the subjective assessments of the performance. The first issue was that the means were all higher than 4.00, meaning that the respondents thought that their organization's performance was higher than comparable units. Especially in schools, the respondents assessed the organizational performance as relatively much higher than comparable units.

Self-reported, subjective performance measures may be biased upwards, but schools in Oslo are known to perform well when measured in national educational performance tests (Kirkebøen, 2022). Performance indicators between the educational and home care sectors are not comparable, but there are administrative data with many different activity and performance indicators that are available and comparable between local authorities, between schools, and between home care districts. Respondents, in particular politicians and managers, theoretically have access to such data, which they potentially could have used as background information to assess their own units' performance when they responded to the survey.

Assessments of the Adoption of Trust Reforms

The overall purposes of trust reforms are to reduce red tape, increase professional autonomy, and improve collaboration to be more user-oriented, adaptive, and effective. To explore how different stakeholders assess the adoption of the trust reform and the organizational units' performance three years after the decision to use trust as the main principle in management, we analysed relationships between stakeholders' general trust, their viewpoints on the idea of trust reforms in general and the implementation of the reform, and their organizational position.

A review of the literature on sources of public service improvement concluded that the most likely sources are better management and more resources (Boyne, 2003a). We can therefore expect that respondents who view trust reforms positively in general, think that the trust reforms had enough resources during the implementation, and regard the adoption of the trust reform to have made substantial changes, also assess the organizational performance positively.

Moreover, trust involves risk. From cultural theory, we know that people have different attitudes to uncertainty (Hofstede, 1984), and some tend to avoid uncertainty in public management when possible (Hood, 1998). We can therefore expect that people who have low trust in people in general also view the idea of trust reforms less positively, because they potentially involve more risk, than people who have high trust in people in general. It is also interesting to see if people's general trust is related to their assessments of the adoption of trust reforms and their assessments of organizational performance.

Finally, the literature on common source bias (George & Pandey, 2017; Podsakoff et al., 2012) and measuring organizational performance has shown that organizational position may affect the assessment of organizational performance. Specifically, top managers tend to bias the assessments of their own unit's or organization's performance upwards (Meier & O'Toole, 2013). Some argue that managers' subjective assessments of their own unit's

or organization's performance are therefore invalid and that other data, for example administrative data for organizational performance, should be used instead. Others argue that respondents who know that their subjective measures can be cross-checked against objective performance measures have little incentive to report biased measures (Singh et al., 2016). Singh et al. argued that carefully collected subjective measures can be used when 'objective', comparable (administrative) data are unavailable, for example across countries and across different services, and their analysis indicated that such measures could be internally consistent. Such measures, therefore, can probably be used to assess relative performance, but it is questionable if subjective performance measures, especially if assessed by managers for their own organizations, are valid measures for absolute performance. Moreover, managers and employees assess different elements of performance differently (Favero et al., 2018). Managers may have better oversight and may be better situated to assess overall performance while employees and professionals may have better access to assess task performance. To assess unit and organizational performance by subjective measures, it could be wise to include different types of respondents. We therefore asked politicians as well as managers and employees.

To explore such relationships, we developed scales for the adoption of the trust reform and organizational performance and analysed relationships with the respondents' general trust, standpoint on the idea of trust reforms, and viewpoint on the adequacy of time and resources to implement the trust reform satisfactorily. The scale for the adoption of the trust reform included six of the nine elements mentioned above and concerned improved communication, managerial and professional autonomy, user involvement, decision quality, collaboration between managers and employees and their organizations, and collaboration across organizational levels and between colleagues (mean = 3.95, SD = 1.42, alpha = 0.93). (Three items on improved goal ambiguity, less detailed control, and more digital services were omitted from the scale because a principal component analysis showed that these questions had high uniqueness (Hair et al., 2019).) The scale for organizational performance included the four questions mentioned above concerning the quality of the services, innovations, goal achievement, and service effectiveness relative to comparable units or organizations (mean = 4.72, SD = 1.01, alpha = 0.85).

Table 6.1 reports the respondents' general trust, degree of positive standpoint on the idea of trust reforms, their view on the adequateness of time and resources to implement trust-based management satisfactorily, assessment of the adoption of the trust reform 2017–2020, and organizational unit performance in 2021, by organizational position. General trust was high, but politicians and managers had more general trust than employees. All three groups were clearly positive about the ideas of trust-based management, but the managers were most positive. Regarding the view on whether there had been

Table 6.1 *General trust, view on the idea of trust-based management, view on adequate time and resources for implementation, assessment of the adoption of the trust reform and organizational unit performance by organizational position*

	General trust		Standpoint on the idea of TBM		Inadequate time and resources to implement TBM		Adoption of TBM		Organizational performance		
	N	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Politicians	62–63	8.52	1.56	5.79	1.28	3.84	1.52	4.07	1.41	4.64	0.97
Managers	119	8.11	1.79	6.15	1.05	4.08	1.75	4.62	1.33	4.99	0.95
Employees	465–466	7.46	2.23	5.67	1.24	4.67	1.53	3.76	1.40	4.66	1.02
All	648	7.68	2.13	5.77	1.22	4.48	1.60	3.95	1.42	4.72	1.01

Note: Managers encompass frontline managers and higher-level managers. Adoption of trust-based management was measured with six indicators (mean = 3.95, SD = 1.42, alpha = 0.93). Organizational performance was measured with four indicators (mean = 4.72, SD = 1.01, alpha = 0.85). General trust was measured on a ten-point Likert scale (1 = one cannot be careful enough, 10 = most people are trustworthy).
Source: Author's own data source.

insufficient time and resources to implement trust-based management, the employees were most negative and the politicians the most positive. Managers assessed the adoption of trust-based management and organizational performance higher than the politicians and the employees, but employees assessed the adoption of trust-based management substantially lower than the politicians and managers did.

Based on the two scales, it seems like the adoption of trust-based management has been modest but that organizational performance in the different units was assessed as higher than in comparable units and organizations. If the adoption of the reform has led to few changes, one could question the impact of the reform at all, at least so far. Another interesting question is whether trust-based management in the City of Oslo is new or has been common practice for a long time, even before 2015. It is, nevertheless, interesting to note that there are different assessments of the adoption of the reform, where managers found that there had been improvements while employees did not find much improvements. The subjective assessments of the organizational performance seem at first sight to support the view that managers may bias their assessments of performance more so than employees and politicians.

To explore factors that might influence people's assessment of trust reform, we ran a multiple (OLS) regression model with adoption of trust-based management as the dependent variable and general trust, positive standpoint on the idea of trust reforms, negative view on sufficient time and resources for satisfactory implementation, and leadership position (0 = employees, 1 = front-line managers, higher-level managers, politicians) as independent variables. The test statistics did not reveal deviations from the assumptions for regression analyses except for the significant test score for non-normality, but the Shapiro–Wilk test is sensitive to sample size and is often significant in large sample sizes. Table 6.2 reports the results.

The results from the regression analysis show that all four independent variables were significantly related to the respondents' assessment of the adoption of trust-based management. The model explained 21 per cent of the variation ($R^2 = 0.21$) which means that other factors explain most of the variation, but also that the factors in the model may influence people's assessments of trust reforms to some degree.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The analysis showed that there was a strong positive and significant bivariate relationship between the adoption of trust-based management and organizational performance ($r = 0.54$, $p < .001$). Note, however, that correlation does not automatically imply causation, and our analysis showed that many factors are related to how people assess the adoption of trust-based management and

Table 6.2 Multiple regression (OLS) of assessment of adoption of trust-based management (N = 646)

	Coefficient	Beta	p-value
Constant	1.95***		<.001
General trust	0.13***	0.20	<.001
Positive standpoint on the idea of trust reforms	0.28***	0.24	<.001
Negative view on sufficient time and resources for satisfactory implementation	-0.16***	-0.18	<.001
Leadership position (0 = employees, 1 = frontline managers, higher-level managers, politicians)	0.36**	0.11	0.002

Notes: ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Coefficient of determination (R^2) = 0.21, adjusted R^2 = 0.20. F-value = 41.52 ($p < 0.001$). Cook' distance test for influential observations, max. value = 0.03. Shapiro–Wilk test for non-normality = 0.98 ($p < 0.001$). Breusch–Pagan test for heteroskedasticity = 13.23 ($p = 0.01$). Variance inflation index (VIF) test for multicollinearity, max. value = 1.10.

Source: Author's own data source.

organizational performance. People with high general trust tended to view the idea of trust-based management more positively than people with low general trust. High-trusting people also tended to think that there were enough time and resources to implement trust-based management satisfactorily more than low-trusting people. People with a positive view of the idea of trust-based management also reported higher adoption and higher organizational performance than people with a less positive view of the idea of trust-based management. People who thought there were insufficient time and resources to implement trust-based management satisfactorily judged the adoption and performance to be lower than people who were happy with the time and resources for the implementation. The literature on common method bias points to problems using subjective measures of organizational performance, especially when managers provide the data and the data come from the same source. Our analysis supports the view that there may be issues related to biased self-reported performance measures, especially from managers, but also that other factors besides measurement bias are influencing assessments of implementation and organizational performance as impacts of trust reforms. The organizational position of the people assessing the reforms and their organization's relative performance, the sector, and political issues may also be important factors in such assessments.

Specific trust reforms may be more contested than the general idea of trust-based management. One could have expected that it was the politicians who would have the most positive views on the idea of trust-based management, but it was the managers who were most positive. The political basis for trust reform in Oslo was to roll back some of the former political regime's policies on performance management and contracting out. Therefore, there could have been divergent political views on this specific reform that explain the relatively low level of positive views towards trust-based management among the politicians in this city, more than a general low appreciation of trust-based management among politicians in general.

The adoption of trust-based management seemed to have resulted in modest changes three years after the formal decision to implement trust as the main principle for management in our case, as assessed by the respondents. There seemed, nevertheless, to have been some more empowerment of managers and employees, which is a crucial element in trust reforms. One should be careful, though, to conclude that trust-based management has little impact on management practice and services. There could be widespread trust-based management even though specific trust reforms seem to be slowly adopted. Note also that trust is a fluffy concept and trust has been part of several management models that have been adopted during previous decades of reform. Also, Bentzen found in a case study of Copenhagen that: 'A core challenge at the central level was to figure out how to relate and distinguish trust from the previous stream of ideas' (Bentzen, 2019b, p. 104). The difficulty of identifying the specific contribution of an ongoing trust reform from the impacts of trust in earlier or other contemporary reforms may be a challenge in assessing trust reforms.

In conclusion, we can state that many view the idea of trust-based management positively. Trust reforms are popular but also contested because trust reforms are parts of larger political projects. Assessing the adoption of trust-based management and its impacts on organizational performance is ridden with the usual challenges in measuring organizational changes and performance. In assessing trust reforms, we need to acknowledge common source bias but also that reforms and organizational performance are assessed differently by different stakeholders with different experiences in different organizational roles and positions. The spirit of trust reforms, however, is to listen, reflect, and act on such assessments.

Public management reforms are defined as planned changes in public sector organizations' processes and structures for them to work better (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2000). If reforms are planned changes, and trust reforms are magic concepts where the changes are unknown until those who have been empowered and become more autonomous themselves make the necessary changes, then one could paradoxically question to what extent trust reforms could fully

fit the usual conception of reforms. This may be an ongoing challenge for all those who work with trust reforms.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This chapter is part of the ‘Improving trust-based management in Nordic urban governance and management education’ project, financed by the Norwegian Research Council (302053). Thanks to Katriina Byström, Sofie Aas Dalsgaard, Jesper Rosenberg Hansen, Tobias Johansson-Berg, Svetlana Norkin, Sven Siverbo, Maria Bak Skov, Helge Svare, Mia Vabø, Christian Wittrock, and the contact group at the City of Oslo for their cooperation in developing the questionnaire and facilitating the data collection. Thanks to all the respondents who took the time to answer the survey.

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