

# High-Performing Organizations in the Public Sector: Characteristics and Strategies to Achieve HPO in Developing Contexts

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**Abstract** - Public-sector organizations in developing countries face increasing pressure to improve effectiveness and service delivery despite political instability, institutional weaknesses, and limited resources. As HPO principles gain attention in the public sector, this study investigates the specific attributes and methodologies required to drive high performance within resource-constrained environments. Drawing on narrative and integrative literature, this study synthesizes conceptual, empirical, and practice-oriented research on HPO frameworks, leadership, human resource management, and public sector performance. The findings delineate five fundamental attributes of high-performing organizations: high-quality management, skilled employees, openness and action orientation, a long-term orientation, and a commitment to continual development, which are pertinent to public institutions and necessitate contextual adaptation. The findings indicate that effective leadership, strategic human resource management systems, performance management systems, and supportive organizational cultures are critical enablers of improved service delivery and organizational effectiveness. However, political interference, a lack of administrative capacity, and institutional complexities continue to make it difficult to implement these plans. Sustainable high performance in transitional governments requires a phased approach that respects local realities rather than a one-size-fits-all solution.

**Keywords:** Public sector, High-Performance organization, organizational constraints, developing countries, administrative capacity

## 1 Introduction

Rising citizen expectations, complex societal challenges, and fiscal pressures compel public organizations to continually reform and adopt high-performance organization (HPO) principles to maintain public service delivery and institutional effectiveness, thereby ensuring a strategic position for delivering public services efficiently [1]. Organizational performance is among the most important concepts, rapidly gaining prominence among scholars and practitioners. It is now the goal of organizations in both the private and public sectors to become high-performance organizations [2]. It balances performance measurement, quality, stakeholder relations, and other factors to achieve organizational objectives and ultimately greater success [3]. Practitioners and scholars in public administration have increasingly focused on what makes organizations high-performing and on strategies to achieve and sustain high performance [4].

Several definitions for high-performing organizations exist in the literature, with Mark Popovich's description among the most cited: "groups of employees who produce desired goods or services at higher

quality with the same or fewer resources.” Their productivity and quality improve continuously, from day to day, week to week, and year to year, leading to the achievement of their mission [5]. In their definition of HPO, Schermerhorn, Hunt, and Osborn (2005) argue that “high-performance organizations are designed to bring out the best in people and produce sustainable organizational results while creating high-quality-of-work-life environments” [6].

The High Performance Organization (HPO) framework developed by de Waal is widely used as a conceptual lens in meta-analytic studies that integrate findings from 290 HPO conceptual and empirical studies to investigate the characteristics of successful business ventures. The study found that high-quality management, high-quality employees, openness and action orientation, long-term orientation, and continuous improvement and renewal contribute to organizational performance. Specifically, de Waal proposed that high-performance organizations achieve superior long-term financial performance by continuously improving core capabilities, establishing integrated management structures, and treating employees as the organization's primary assets [4]. Although the HPO framework was primarily derived from the private sector, its focus on management quality, openness, action orientation, and long-term orientation is relevant to the public sector for enhancing service delivery and organizational effectiveness [4] [7]. However, those principles may be constrained by political control, conflicting goals, and strict formal rules that impede their implementation [8] [9].

This review paper synthesizes the characteristics of high-performing organizations and identifies key strategies for achieving high performance in the public sector. This review identifies evidence gaps in non-Western, developing, and post-conflict administrative contexts and integrates HPO research with public-sector performance, leadership, and human resource management (HRM) literature.

The High-Performance Organization structure is well-known in the private sector but isn't widely implemented in the public sector. This is especially true in non-Western countries, where administrative frameworks differ significantly. This review addresses a significant deficiency by offering an integrative synthesis that delineates the necessary recalibration of the five universal High-Performance Organization (HPO) factors (Management Quality, Employee Quality, Openness, Long-term Orientation, and Continuous Improvement) to endure the distinct challenges posed by political oversight and organizational rigidity [10] [8]. The main point of this study is that high performance in the public sector is not just about using technologies from the private sector. It is also about changing leadership and HR practices to make organizations more legitimate and resilient in contexts where institutions are limited [11] [12].

## **2 Methodology**

This research employs a narrative and integrative review to incorporate theoretical frameworks and empirical findings from studies on High-Performance Organizations (HPOs) in the public sector. A thorough search was conducted across prominent academic databases, such as Google Scholar, Web of Science, and JSTOR, encompassing literature published from 1990 to 2025. This timeframe was chosen to illustrate the development of New Public Management and the eventual emergence of the HPO framework [13]. The literature is chosen based on the following criteria: it provides information on HPO parameters or "best practice" constructs; it is relevant to public administration; it includes empirical data or a meta-analytical synthesis; and it offers specific insights into leadership or HRM strategies [14]. This assessment strikes a balance between academic rigor and practical usefulness by including both peer-reviewed publications and high-impact papers from organizations such as the OEC [15].

### **2.1 Research Gap**

Although there has been substantial progress, there remain gaps in the research on HPOs and high-performing public organizations. Most empirical studies conducted in Western and OECD nations have

resulted in insufficient evidence regarding the applicability of the HPO framework in developing, non-Western, or post-conflict environments. Additionally, there is also a need for further studies on multi-level leadership and how political and administrative leadership work together to create high performance. Research on digital transformation, cross-sector collaboration, and networked governance as facilitators or impediments to high-performance organization characteristics in the public sector continues to emerge.

Lastly, although HRM and training are often cited as significant, there are too few studies investigating the mechanisms by which HRM practices and training transfer facilitate HPO outcomes in public organizations. These gaps present opportunities for future empirical research, particularly in developing regions where institutional conditions significantly differ from those reported in the existing literature.

The main research gaps identified in the literature are categorized in Table 1.

Table 1. Identified Research Gaps in HPO and Public Sector Performance Studies

Research Area	Current Focus in Literature	Identified Gap	Future Research Direction
Geographic Scope	Predominantly Western and OECD countries	Limited evidence from developing and post-conflict contexts	Comparative studies in emerging economies
Leadership Studies	Focus on administrative leadership	Limited integration of political-administrative interaction	Multi-level governance analysis
HRM & Training	HRM linked to performance outcomes	Limited empirical evidence on training transfer mechanisms	Longitudinal HRM impact studies
Digital Transformation	Emerging studies on digital governance	Limited integration with HPO framework	AI and big-data integration into HPO
Institutional Constraints	Recognized but under-theorized	Lack of context-sensitive adaptation models	Contextualized HPO implementation frameworks

### 3 Findings

Implementing HPO principles in "developing contexts" faces distinct structural and cultural constraints. These environments are often characterized by political instability, with frequent shifts in leadership that disrupt long-term strategic goals, and by weak administrative capacity, in which limited financial resources and technical expertise hinder continuous improvement [15] [9] [16]. Furthermore, traditional hierarchical structures and informal institutional logics—such as *wasta* or *guanxi*—can stifle the "Openness and Action Orientation" required for high performance, as decisions are often driven by patronage rather than merit [11]. Therefore, applying HPO frameworks "as is" in underdeveloped contexts is irrational, as the model is primarily based on the structure, culture, and various levels of capacity of developed countries. must be tailored to the unique cultural and specific developing contexts to shield civil servants from the twin threats of excessive proceduralism and political interference [17] [18].

Considering the context and tailoring De Waal's HPO framework to it can be an effective strategy for achieving a high-performing organization. It outlines five key traits that set high-performing organizations apart. These factors serve as a constructive framework for evaluating extensive HPO and public-sector performance research.

The five core characteristics of High-Performance Organizations, synthesized from the literature, are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Core Characteristics of High-Performance Organizations and Public-Sector Relevance

HPO Factor	Core Characteristics (General HPO Literature)	Relevance in Public Sector Context	Key Constraints in Developing Contexts
High-Quality Management	Transparent, accountable, decisive, performance-driven leadership	Enhances administrative effectiveness and trust	Political interference, patronage networks
High-Quality Employees	Skilled workforce, continuous learning, merit-based recruitment	Improves service delivery and innovation	Skill shortages, aging workforce
Openness & Action Orientation	Open communication, fast decision-making, and learning from mistakes	Encourages innovation and responsiveness	Bureaucratic rigidity, hierarchical culture
Long-Term Orientation	Strategic continuity, stakeholder trust, sustainability focus	Promotes social value and institutional legitimacy	Leadership turnover, short political cycles
Continuous Improvement & Renewal	Performance evaluation, innovation, adaptive governance	Strengthens resilience and reform capacity	Limited resources, weak evaluation systems

### 3.1 High Quality Management

The first factor is that managers of high-performing organizations are characterized by transparency, skill, a focus on results, and strong relationships with employees. These types of managers ensure that individuals understand what is required of them, hold themselves and others accountable, maintain transparency in their conduct, and encourage employees to discuss matters and be involved in the decision-making process to adapt to changing conditions. Studies show that management quality is one of the best indicators of long-term high performance across any field [19] [4].

### 3.2 High quality of employees

HPOs invest significant resources in hiring, training, and retaining top talent. They build a dedicated, skilled workforce by carefully selecting candidates, encouraging ongoing learning and growth, and providing fair performance reviews. HPOs encourage employees to demonstrate responsibilities and

competencies and to exchange ideas, thereby fostering greater innovation and responsiveness. This effective investment in staff members enables the organization to carry out its mission and maintain high levels of performance over time [20].

### **3.3 Openness and Action Orientation**

High-performing organizations are characterized by open cultures that are receptive to new ideas, encourage constructive criticism, and treat mistakes as opportunities for learning. This, coupled with a willingness to act promptly on them, enables the organization to identify opportunities for improvement and implement necessary changes without delay [21] [22]. These organizations encourage employees to experiment with novel approaches and make data-driven, fast decisions, rather than being bogged down by excessive bureaucracy. This type of culture is significant for fostering innovation and knowledge exchange, as HPO managers engage employees in organizational procedures and view mistakes as opportunities to learn and develop skills [18].

### **3.4 Long-term orientation:**

High-performing organizations emphasize long-term relationships with stakeholders, employees, and society rather than short-term gains. They invest in building trust, reputation, and skills, as well as making decisions that will have future advantages. Long-term orientation in public organizations emphasizes social value, sustainability, and intergenerational fairness [23].

### **3.5 Continuous improvement and renewal**

HPOs systematize learning and improvement as part of their culture by regularly assessing performance and testing new ideas. They regularly examine review processes, structures, and strategies to ensure successful service delivery. This factor is closely related to adaptive governance, innovation capacity, and knowledge management [15]. This regular updating enables organizations to replace superseded strategies with new standards by developing products, services, and procedures that provide them with a competitive edge [22]. Applying the HPO framework to public organizations requires attention to several distinctive features of the public sector. Public organizations operate under conditions of political oversight, multiple and often conflicting goals, legal and procedural constraints, and high levels of transparency and public scrutiny [12].

## **4 Strategies for achieving a High Performance Public Sector Organization**

Insights relevant to the public sector indicate that when applying the HPO framework to public organizations, attention must be paid to factors unique to the public sector. Government organizations operate under political oversight, diverse and frequently conflicting objectives, both internal and external, legal and procedural limitations, and heightened public transparency and scrutiny, necessitating the development of systems that balance efficiency with accountability and equity [12] [8].

Studies that have explicitly applied the HPO framework to public agencies suggest that many public organizations score comparatively lower on openness and action orientation, performance-oriented management, and flexibility. However, organizations that deliberately implement HPO strategies demonstrate strengths in long-term societal orientation and commitment to fairness and equity. At the same time, improvements in service quality, employee engagement, and citizen satisfaction have been reported [22].

Studies of high-performing governments show that robust leadership, effective performance management, strategic HRM, and a culture that supports the organization are key determinants of success. In particular, leadership that is both politically aware and effective in managing seems important for improving performance when dealing with numerous stakeholders. Effective leadership is further complemented by strategic human resource management, which is essential for harnessing the workforce's potential to enhance productivity, creativity, and reduction of cost [10]. The literature identifies several overarching categories of strategy for developing high-performing public organizations. These categories are closely aligned with the HPO factors, but they are designed to meet the needs of public administration in general [10] [19] [23].

#### **4.1 Practices of leadership and top management.**

Systematic examinations of public-sector leadership studies underscore the influence of senior managers' values, integrity, trust, skills, and change leadership on organizational performance. Transformational and performance-oriented leadership styles that set clear goals, give employees greater autonomy, and sustain reform efforts are associated with better outcomes. Public sector leaders need to be both performance-focused and supportive, ensuring everyone knows their roles and encouraging openness and learning [10] [24] [16].

#### **4.2 Talent management and building skills in HRM**

Talent management is a significant challenge for many public administrations, particularly as their workforces age and skilled labor shortages persist. High-performing public-sector organizations create integrated HRM systems that include strategic workforce planning, selective hiring, ongoing training, succession planning, and career development. Importantly, they also create conditions that facilitate transfer of training by ensuring that workers can apply their new skills on the job and receive support from their supervisors and coworkers [25] [26].

#### **4.3 Organizational culture, openness, and problem management**

Studies suggest that open, learning-oriented cultures are essential for attaining and maintaining high performance. These cultures promote feedback, communication across organizational levels, and the constructive resolution of shortcomings and problems. Research on workplace conflict, bullying, and stress in public services indicates that ineffective problem management can undermine trust, morale, and performance, while equitable and transparent problem resolution fosters a healthy, high-performing environment. [17] [21] [27].

#### **4.4 Management of performance and focus on the people**

Modern performance management in government is shifting from a tool for controlling employees to a system focused on learning and development. When it aligns with HPO principles, performance management helps set clear goals, provide ongoing feedback, build skills, and ensure alignment with citizens' priorities. A growing number of digital tools and statistical data analysis are being used to connect performance information with learning, innovative concepts, and public accountability [28] [29].

The major strategic interventions derived from the literature are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Strategic Interventions for Building High-Performance Public Organizations

Strategic Area	Key Practices	Expected Outcomes	Supporting Literature Themes
Leadership & Top Management	Transformational leadership, ethical governance, reform, continuity	Improved organizational commitment and performance	Leadership-performance nexus
Strategic HRM & Talent Management	Workforce planning, merit-based recruitment, and training transfer	Higher productivity and innovation capacity	HRM-performance linkage
Organizational Culture & Openness	Feedback systems, conflict management, and learning culture	Increased trust and employee engagement	Organizational culture research
Performance Management	Data-driven metrics, digital tools, and continuous feedback	Enhanced accountability and citizen satisfaction	Results-based management
Long-Term Institutional Development	Stakeholder trust, sustainability orientation	Institutional resilience and legitimacy	Governance & legitimacy theory

## 5 Conclusion

The review identifies five key characteristics of high-performing organizations that are consistently supported across the literature: high-quality management, a workforce with superior skills and competencies, an openness to change and action orientation, a long-term strategic horizon, and a commitment to continuous improvement and renewal [4] [14].

Nevertheless, applying an HPO framework "as is" without considering the context of public sector organizations in underdeveloped countries is illogical, as the model is primarily based on the structures, cultures, and various levels of capacity of developed organizations. It needs to be tailored to the unique work practices and cultural factors of a specific developing context, so that its principles support rather than conflict with local practices and customs [11] [19]. The evaluation of the reviewed studies indicates that achieving high performance in the public and nonprofit sectors requires more than the mere technical implementation of the HPO framework; it demands a profound transformation of leadership culture that harmonizes accountability with employee empowerment. The essential point is that the five HPO elements are general; they work best in the public sector when leaders can navigate political constraints while maintaining a "human-centered" and "problem-solving" mindset.

Future research should concentrate on two principal avenues:

1. Digital Integration: Investigation into how AI and big-data analytics may help public organizations in resource-constrained settings reach HPO status by improving decision-making and increasing openness.
2. Longitudinal Impact: Performing multi-year research in emerging or post-conflict countries to ascertain which HPO characteristics exhibit the most resilience to changes in politics and organizational turnover.

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