

# The Catalyst of Change: Analyzing the Impact of Public Service Motivation on Proactive Work Behavior

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## Abstract

In the face of complex societal demands, modern governance requires civil servants who move beyond passive compliance toward proactive behavior. This study investigates the relationship between Public Service Motivation (PSM) and proactive behavior among civil servants in East Java, Indonesia. Using a quantitative approach, data were collected from civil servants participating in professional development programs at the East Java Provincial Training Agency. The research model examines how the core dimensions of public service motivation—including attraction to policy-making, commitment to the public interest, compassion, and self-sacrifice—collectively and individually drive proactive actions in the workplace. The findings reveal that while public service motivation serves as a robust collective foundation for initiative, the dimensions do not influence behavior equally. A critical discovery of this research is that a normative commitment to the public interest stands as the primary catalyst for proactivity. While civil servants may possess high levels of compassion and a willingness to sacrifice, these emotional traits do not necessarily translate into self-initiated changes unless anchored by a strong sense of duty toward the collective good. Conversely, an interest in the technicalities of policy-making shows the least connection to proactive effort on the ground. These results underscore the importance of value-alignment in public administration. To overcome the "passivity trap" inherent in many bureaucracies, public sector organizations must move beyond technical training and focus on strengthening the mission-driven commitment of their workforce, ensuring that the desire to serve is effectively transformed into proactive, responsive excellence.

**Keywords:** Public Service Motivation, Proactive Behavior, Civil Servant

## Introduction

In the modern public sector, there is a period characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA). Under these circumstances, the bureaucratic model of "command and control" may not be able to cope with quick transformations in society and technology (Kurniawan, 2016; Maryam, 2016). Historically, the concept of bureaucracy within these institutions has been deeply intertwined with the substantial role of external controls in shaping organizational behavior. While proactiveness is an important factor in achieving service excellence and citizen confidence. In the era of citizens who expect the same level of responsiveness from the government as from the private sector, passivity is not an option. A proactive civil servant owns his or her performance in terms of serving

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citizens, constantly looking for ways to make the process more efficient and minimize “red tape” on their own initiative (Agustina & Harijanto, 2022; Apipudin et al., 2023). It will help provide the public with services promptly and with foresight, which is vital for the establishment of the new administration state.

Proactive behavior refers to the process of undertaking actions to enhance the existing situations or create new ones (Parker & Collins, 2010; Parker & Liao, 2016; Strauss & Parker, 2018). In this case, proactive behavior in the public sector becomes an effective tool against the rigidity of bureaucratic organizations. In this regard, the significance of proactive behavior can be attributed to the capacity of such behavior to promote innovative activities at the microlevel of administration (Boonyarit, 2023; Pradesa et al., 2023). Indeed, although a significant number of changes in the public sector are imposed by top-down reforms, only frontline employees have enough understanding of the peculiarities of their communities. The use of “voice behavior” and “taking charge” contributes to the agility of the government as an institution.

However, Public Service Motivation (PSM) represents a unique phenomenon that distinguishes the public sector employee from their private sector colleagues. Public Service Motivation (PSM) – defined as an individual’s predisposition to respond to motives grounded primarily or uniquely in public institutions (Perry et al., 2010; Perry & Wise, 1990) – offers a more intrinsic perspective on performance. It includes an attraction to public policymaking, commitment to the public interest, and self-sacrifice. The significance of PSM should not be overlooked since it plays an essential role in maintaining employees’ motivation at a high level under the constant watchful eyes of the citizens and the lack of financial benefits. It provides civil servants with moral strength to perform their tasks with dedication regardless of the absence of external rewards. PSM also serves as a barrier to burnout and professional stasis (Agustina et al., 2022; Guy & Lee, 2015). Public administration usually entails facing many ethical conflicts and stringent guidelines, leading to learned helplessness. Nevertheless, when an individual’s PSM is high, he or she develops self-sustaining vigor because their need to contribute to society provides constant impetus. This means that the organization will always be driven by its social responsibilities, not merely by the need to produce administrative outcomes or develop careers.

PSM theory suggests that individuals possessing higher levels of this motivation are more likely to seek employment in the public sector and exhibit superior performance once there. (Bozeman, 2014; Harari et al., 2017) From the point of view of the organization, building PSM is crucial for the integrity of public services. Employees whose PSM is high have little chance to engage in corrupt activities and unethical behaviors since they put the common good before personal benefits. As such, a strong PSM leads to the development of the value-based culture, in which serving the people is not a mere cliché but a guiding principle (Nowell et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2020). Consequently, it is crucial to know how to manage PSM for anyone working in the public sector.

The connection between PSM and proactivity can be explained by the concept of “can-do,” “reason-to,” and “energized-to” modes of human agency. The reason-to engage in proactivity comes from the public service motivation that gives the “reason-to” be proactive. A person who experiences a powerful call to do public service acquires more felt responsibility in relation to doing something beneficial to the organization (Agustina et al., 2021; Schwarz et al., 2020; Tanjung et al., 2023). Thus, public service motivation serves as a basis for developing responsibility that makes a person see a difference between being just employed and having a mission to complete (Putranto et al., 2018; Supriatna et al., 2019; Utami et al., 2022).

When considering this connection in the context of public organizations, it should also note the close connection between the individual’s identity and the mission of such an organization. Being oriented towards helping other people and making life better is an innate tendency of any high-PSM individual and this tendency can be used as motivation to make him or her perform proactive activities (Amegavi & Mensah, 2020; Wang et al., 2020). Under certain conditions, such employees become “vigorously engaged” and ready to invest additional efforts to solve organizational problems (Agustina & Harijanto, 2022; Hidayat et al., 2021). In other words, public service motivation becomes a spark that activates proactive behavior. In essence, the relationship between PSM and proactivity results in an empowering process for the civil service. When employees who are driven by a spirit of PSM engage in proactive behaviors, which have an observable effect on society, their levels of PSM become heightened. The importance of the relationship is significant especially when it comes to the public sector since it is possible to circumvent the constraints of organizational hierarchy through the internal motivations of the employees.

This study has been necessitated by the growing disparity between the increasing complexity of public expectations and the continuing rigidity of existing organizational frameworks (Amha & Brhane, 2020; Buchheim et al., 2020; Rahayu et al., 2022). In an effort to embrace digitalization and modernize, bureaucratic systems have become increasingly inflexible (Hawa & Salomo, 2020; Sudarsa et al., 2022). It is crucial to find out whether there are ways through which psychological resources within individuals can help overcome this resistance. In the absence of empirical data regarding factors that motivate individuals to act proactively, it becomes difficult for organizations to exploit the untapped potential of their greatest resource – the desire of their members to work towards the benefit of society as a whole.

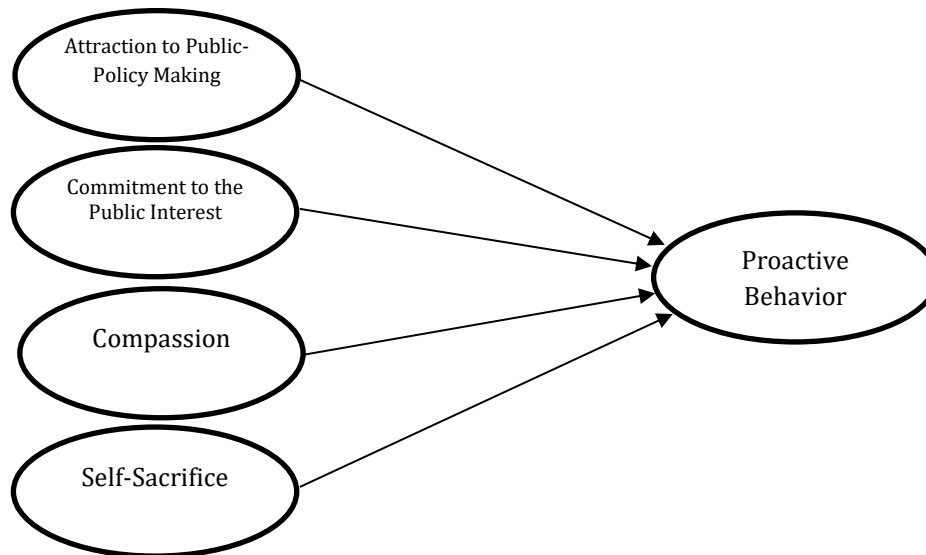
In this study, the phenomenon of a "passivity trap" is examined. While it's frequently observed in public administration contexts, where talented and capable civil servants could be demotivated to engage in proactive activities due to organizational barriers or unclear channels for motivation (Atika et al., 2018; Campbell, 2018; Marques, 2021). Although the notion of Public Service Motivation (PSM) is thoroughly researched, the precise context of its effectiveness as an incentive factor for encouraging proactive behavior among employees remains unclear. In other words, we need to find the answer to how this motivation becomes a trigger for proactive activities within different administrative contexts. To this end, the main purpose of this research will be to test the effect of PSM on proactive behavior and mediating variables enhancing this association.

## Methods

In the current work, quantitative research will be used to empirically examine the relationship between the dimensions of Public Service Motivation (PSM) and the proactive behavior of the civil servants. With the application of a deductive method, the present research is aimed at testing hypotheses regarding the examined relationship based on objective statistical analysis. A conceptual model that is developed for the purposes of this research is dedicated to examining the effect of four independent variables (attractiveness to public policy-making, commitment to the public good, compassion, and self-sacrifice as the key dimensions of PSM) on the one dependent variable (proactive behavior).

The population of the research under discussion involves civil servants (Aparatur Sipil Negara) working in the province of East Java, Indonesia. The data was collected during a certain two-month period, namely in August and September of 2023. The aforementioned time period was chosen by me to provide the latest picture of the motivational state and behavior of the relevant population. In order to make the research both feasible and up-to-date, I focus my attention on those civil servants who are currently pursuing professional development and administration careers. The sampling procedure adopted non-probability sampling, where civil servants involved in training programs at the East Java Provincial Training Agency (Badan Diklat Provinsi Jawa Timur) were targeted. Respondents were selected based on their willingness to be part of the study. Thus, the sample population comprised civil servants with the right qualifications and experience needed to contribute valuable data. Using this method, 127 civil servants were effectively sampled. The sample size is adequate to perform statistical analysis to establish the correlation and impact described in the research model. In line with a standardized research procedure, data was collected using online questionnaires. This mode was adopted considering the convenience of the respondents in accessing the questionnaire while ensuring accurate data entry. The questionnaire used Likert scale items to evaluate the level of public service motivation of the respondents and the frequency of their proactive behavior. In the process of collecting data, the researcher took into account the ethical principles of the study by ensuring that all 127 respondents were aware of the study's objectives and that participation in the study was voluntary and confidential.

The main statistical technique used in testing the research hypotheses is multiple linear regression analysis. Such a technique is chosen since it permits a simultaneous assessment of the role played by the different dimensions of Public Service Motivation – attraction towards public policy-making, dedication to the public interest, empathy, and sacrifice – in the development of the observed variation of proactive behavior. In addition, the relationship strength and significance will be analyzed using the following indicators: coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ), F-test for joint significance, and t-test for individual hypothesis testing. Calculation of regression coefficients for each independent variable will allow us to identify which particular dimension of public service motivation serves as the most powerful catalyst of proactive behavior in the civil servants of East Java.



**Figure 1.** Conceptual Framework  
Source: developed for this study (2023).

## Results and Discussion

Reliability test of the instrument using Cronbach's Alpha ( $\alpha$ ) indicates that all variables have high internal consistency. In this regard, each of the four dimensions of Public Service Motivation: Attraction to Public Policy with  $\alpha = .727$ , Commitment to Public Interest with  $\alpha = .739$ , Compassion with  $\alpha = .782$ , and Self-Sacrifice with  $\alpha = .799$ , surpasses the standard value of .70. Additionally, the dependent variable of Proactive Behavior recorded the highest Cronbach's Alpha score of .823. This means that the measurement questions are consistent for assessing their corresponding concepts so that they can be used in regression analysis. From the results on the descriptive statistics, it can be deduced that the civil servants in East Java perceive motivation and behavior in a very positive way. The presence of the dimensions of Public Service Motivation is reflected in high mean scores; Compassion with 4.270, and Commitment to Public Interest with 4.194. This suggests that the respondents possess a deep emotional connection to the well-being of others and a strong sense of duty toward the public good. The scores for "Self-Sacrifice" (4.081) and "Attraction to Public Policy" (3.990) further reinforce the profile of a workforce that is ethically grounded and engaged with the systemic aspects of governance.

**Table 1.** Reliability Results and Mean Score

Variables	$\alpha$ (Alpha Cronbach)	Mean
Attraction to Public Policy	.727	3.990
Commitment to Public Interest	.739	4.194
Compassion	.782	4.270
Self-Sacrifice	.799	4.081
Proactive Behavior	.823	4.043

Source: data analyzed (2023).

Proactive Behavior, on the other hand, serves as the dependent variable in the research, which also attains a relatively high mean of 4.043. The implication of this finding is that the civil servants, rather than performing their tasks in a passive manner, take proactive actions in anticipation of their future needs and goals. When taken together with the high levels of PSM, the above descriptive statistics provide a clue that a highly motivated public servant workforce is essentially a proactive workforce. High means of all the variables under consideration form the basis of the research.

**Table 2.** Direct Effects

Relationship Among Variables	Beta	t-statistics	P values
Attraction to Public Policy -> Proactive Behavior	-.054	-.519	.605
Commitment to Public Interest -> Proactive Behavior	.370	2.986	.003
Compassion -> Proactive Behavior	.161	1.313	.192
Self-Sacrifice -> Proactive Behavior	.197	1.485	.140

Source: data analyzed (2023).

On the basis of the findings shown in Table 2, it can be concluded that there exists a complex relationship between the four dimensions of Public Service Motivation (PSM) and the proactive behavior of civil servants. First of all, it must be pointed out that not all dimensions of PSM are equally effective when motivating employees to act proactively. Out of the four predictors of proactivity, only Commitment to the Public Interest proved statistically significant. This means that within the framework of East Java's civil service, employees' devotion to the public interest is the most powerful motive for going beyond their official job responsibilities. To be more precise, the correlation between Commitment to the Public Interest and Proactive Behavior showed a statistically significant beta coefficient of .370. In addition, the t-statistic was found equal to 2.986 while the corresponding p-value was equal to .003. Thus, since the latter is much lower than the significance level of .05, we may conclude that this predictor has a statistically significant positive impact on proactivity among employees. Being devoted to the public interest motivates civil servants to act independently, innovatively, and proactively in order to achieve a higher goal.

On the contrary, the other three dimensions, namely Attraction to Public Policy, Compassion, and Self-Sacrifice, were found not to have any significant impact on proactive behaviors among the chosen sample population. Both Self-Sacrifice ( $\beta = .197$ ,  $p = .140$ ) and Compassion ( $\beta = .161$ ,  $p = .192$ ) revealed a positive trend; however, the results were not statistically significant since both had a higher p-value compared to the alpha value of .05, thus proving the presence of both emotional and altruistic attributes among the respondents; however, it might not be enough to make them exhibit proactive behaviors alone. It is interesting to note that Attraction to Public Policy revealed a slightly negative coefficient ( $\beta = -.054$ ,  $p = .605$ ).

In the end, these discoveries help shed light on what the researchers call the spark in their title. This is because the studies reveal that although civil servants may have compassion, they may also be ready to sacrifice themselves, the real engine behind proactive performance appears to be the rational and normative dedication to public interests. Therefore, for any organization operating in the public sector, it is crucial to focus heavily during recruitment and training on fostering commitment to the values inherent in public service.

**Table 3.** Model Summary and ANOVA result

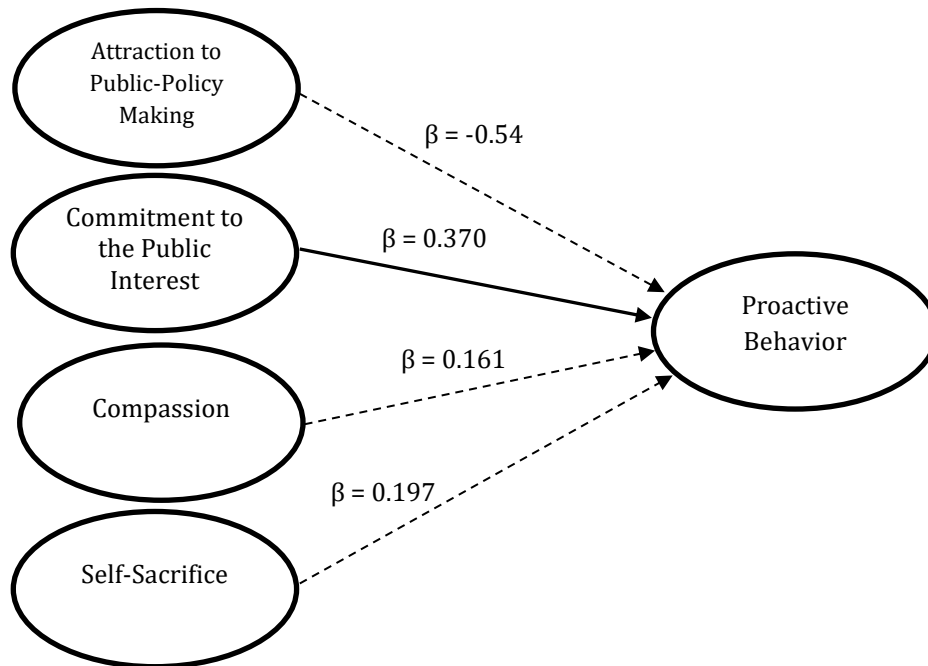
R Square	Adjusted R Square	F	Sig.
.405	.386	20.763	.000 <sup>b</sup>

Source: data analyzed (2023).

From the regression output, it is clear that there exists a significant association between the variables of interest. The calculated F-value of 20.763 at a significance value of .000 implies that the model under consideration is significant. Therefore, it can be concluded that the four dimensions of Public Service Motivation, namely Attraction to Public Policy, Commitment to Public Interest, Compassion, and Self-Sacrifice, have a significant impact on the Proactive Behavior of civil servants. Statistically speaking, it means that the proposed model is significant, and the four motivational dimensions predict employees' initiative in bringing about constructive changes within the organization.

With respect to the explanation provided by the model, an R Square value of .405 signifies that 40.5% of the variability in Proactive Behavior can be accounted for by the variables used in measuring public service motivation. Additionally, the Adjusted R Square value of .386 takes into account the number of independent variables used in the model and suggests that roughly 38.6% of the variability

in proactivity is explained by the public service motivation framework adopted. Such a level of explanatory power can be viewed as significant since humans are affected by numerous internal and external factors when engaging in actions or behaviors. The difference between the R Square and the total variance (approximately 60%) indicates that although PSM acts as a strong influencing factor, there are other factors that may influence proactive behavior, such as the style of leadership or organizational culture and resource availability. It shows that the empowering of civil servants through their public service motivations is no longer an abstract idea, but a statistical tool that influences proactive behavior positively.



**Figure 2.** Path Coefficients  
Source: data analyzed (2023).

From the empirical findings of this study, a powerful observation can be made regarding the motivational behavior of civil servants in East Java. One of the most important conclusions from this research is that, despite the four dimensions of Public Service Motivation (PSM), only Commitment to the Public Interest was found to be a predictor of proactivity. In other words, the “motivating force” for proactivity among civil servants is not necessarily based on feelings of compassion towards others (Compassion), nor does it depend on their desire to learn about the mechanisms of policymaking (Attraction to Policy). It comes from a deep-seated feeling of a normative responsibility towards the common good.

In addition, the non-significant contribution of Attraction to Public Policy implies the discrepancy between being interested in the “political” dimension of administration and initiating action on the ground level. Civil servants who find the policy-making process intriguing might spend all their efforts dealing with the regulatory side of the issue and neglect improving the service delivery process itself (Doberstein, 2016; Gupta et al., 2017). Hence, proactivity appears not to depend on one’s enthusiasm about the job but rather on its potential influence on the community as a whole (Matsuo, 2021). As such, public administrators need to encourage “meaning-making” among their subordinates—making them understand how their activities directly affect the welfare of the community.

The findings have profound implications for human resource management in the public sector. As it is seen from the model, Commitment to the Public Interest is the leading motivator for empowering proactive behavior. Therefore, the recruitment process as well as further training should shift from focusing only on technical skills and knowledge to aligning employees’ values with those of the organization. The organizational intervention strategy might include, for instance, public service storytelling or working directly with service recipients. Through creating an atmosphere where the

public interest serves as the main guide, organizations can ensure that the civil servants do not remain reactive but become proactive and adapt themselves to the changing needs of the 21st-century state.

Theoretically, the results presented above dispute the idea that all PSM dimensions have the same significance when it comes to generating agency (Agustina et al., 2021; Petrovsky & Ritz, 2014; Putranto & Anwar, 2021), in particular, being proactive. By identifying Commitment to the Public Interest as the only important predictor of proactive behavior, the research indicates that normative motives have a distinctive "catalytic" characteristic that affective or cognitive motives may be lacking within the context of a hierarchical bureaucracy (Amegavi & Mensah, 2020). These insights enrich the discussion regarding PSM, arguing that although compassion and altruism are critical components in fostering social solidarity among workers, they do not necessarily provide adequate grounds for employees to justify the risks involved in proactive initiatives that imply "taking charge."

In practical terms, the findings offer a strategic approach for organizations such as the East Java Provincial Training Agency (Badan Diklat) on how to harness the human resources potential within their ranks to be change agents. The management should go beyond mere regulatory compliance training, which is the standard practice currently, and cultivate an atmosphere of "value-based empowerment," whereby the ethical obligation to serve the public is clearly associated with organizational activities. Through stressing that being proactive is essentially an articulation of one's dedication to serving the public good, organizational leaders can minimize the psychological burden of proactivity. In essence, the shift towards a mission-oriented culture will ensure that the bureaucrats are not only efficient, but also proactive in responding to societal demands.

## Conclusion

Conclusion of the study has validated the assertion that PSM acts as a key psychological underpinning that helps develop a proactive workforce in the public sector. Analysis of the data has confirmed that the theoretical framework developed for the purpose of the study is robust in nature, as all the variables related to PSM together explain a notable portion of the variance in proactive behavior. But what stands out as the most important finding of this study is that Commitment to the Public Interest plays a dominant and defining role in the development of proactive behavior among government employees. Despite the presence of empathy and readiness to make sacrifices, it is the dedication to serve the interests of society at large that actually makes the connection between motivation and proactivity possible. According to the results obtained from this research, a number of strategic recommendations can be made concerning public sector management and human resource management. In particular, the Curriculum of the East Java Provincial Training Agency (Badan Diklat) and all institutions similar to it should be reconsidered, shifting the emphasis of training from skills to "value-based leadership." The modules should incorporate activities that will help establish the link between the execution of routine duties and its effects for the common good, because only such an awareness is the driving force of proactive action. If people working in organizations understand why they do what they do, they will start taking initiative. Additionally, it would be advisable to conduct assessments for the public service values, especially when recruiting and promoting employees. This is because the aspect is central in driving the spirit of innovation and foresight in the civil service; thus, it would help identify individuals who have the spark of the public interest. For future research, there could be an exploration of the effect of organizational climate or leadership styles that might clarify why the affective aspects of PSM such as compassion did not drive proactive behavior. Finally, the government will be able to develop and empower its civil servants with the spark of public interest.

Future studies need to examine the moderating/mediating factors that could serve as "the key that unlocks" other aspects of PS Motivation, like the interaction between leadership styles/cultures and compassion/self-sacrifice that motivate initiative. These contextual variables are important in order to shed light on the reasons behind the fact that affective motivations might not lead to proactive behaviors under bureaucratic settings. Moreover, utilizing a longitudinal research design will be beneficial in observing whether proactive behavior can remain stable across different career periods and changes in the political environment. Broadening the study area geographically/institutionally and using a mix of methodologies could contribute to the external validity of results and offer an integrated view towards enabling today's civil servants.

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