

# Achieving the Ethical Workplace

**F**or local government managers, an important responsibility and challenge is to enhance ethical awareness throughout the organization by providing systems that support employees in doing the right things. Managers who use shared leadership—the concept of leadership as an activity engaged in by different people at different times—to establish the necessary support systems will improve their chances of creating an ethical workplace. Developing an organizational vision, mission, values, ethics guidelines, ethics committee, and ethics dialogue, as well as initiating a training program on ethical decision making, will result in a work environment that motivates employees to exercise ethical judgment with confidence. With that empowerment will come responsibility and accountability.

This increased emphasis on and attention to ethics can improve communications, resolve disagreements, and set high standards for employee/management relations. As more local governments adopt such management techniques and processes as continuous quality improvement, the concepts of openness, trust, and allowing employees to take risks gain in ethical importance. Doing the right things right the first time incorporates the universal ethical principles of fairness and honesty with the derivative organizational values of efficiency and effectiveness.

The Government Ethics Center of the Josephson Institute of Ethics supports five ethical principles of public ser-

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**Stephen Bonczek  
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vice: public trust, objective judgment, accountability, democratic leadership, and respectability (*Principles of Public Service Ethics: Standards of Conduct and Guidelines for Government Decision Making*; see reference listing at end of article). These principles of public service ethics reflect moral obligations that exist independently of and transcend obligations imposed by law and formal codes of conduct.

In the process of developing organizational values from ethical principles, a clear picture arises of what is critically important to an organization and its members. Such values as customer service, employee empowerment, professionalism, and integrity provide the parameters for ethical decision making.

Dr. Robert Denhardt's 1993 book, *The Pursuit of Significance*, focuses on highly effective public managers and the reasons for their success, namely, a clear focus on mission and a values-driven organization. A strong ethical foundation becomes institutionalized in the organization if employees are given the responsibility to handle the ethical dimension of their jobs and if organizational values are made an integral part of the workplace, creating both an ethical and a productive organizational climate. The development of an ethical environment is essential to facilitating decision making in the public interest.

Talking about the need for and desirability of an ethical workplace is an important first step that local government managers can take toward infusing their organizations with an ethical perspective. It is, however, just that—a first step. As most significant decisions are made by employees on the front line of service delivery, they need to know that their ethical judgments are supported by the manager, higher-level supervisors, and peers. Employees committed to doing the right thing deserve organizational leadership that encourages an ethical climate sustained

by effective ethical systems.

Easier said than done? Probably. Indeed, employees and the public often make erroneous assumptions about ethics in the local government workplace that can hinder the most determined efforts of managers to foster an ethical environment. These misperceptions must be recognized, understood, and overcome.

### **Ethical Assumptions in the Workplace**

The following false assumptions undermine efforts to enhance ethical awareness in public organizations. Managers who recognize and address these assumptions through education, leadership, and employee empowerment will strengthen their organizations' capacity to act ethically. The restoration of deficient (or absent) ethical systems or strategies will result in much higher levels of trust among employees and citizens. The authors would like to share eight false assumptions with readers, along with our personal reflections on them.

**1. Ethical values are personal and are not expressed within the organization.** False! Just as it is a misconception to believe that public organizations are plagued by ethical problems, it is also a mistake to believe that ethical problems are rare or do not exist at all. This assumption is a dangerous one because many members of government, including chief executives, may earnestly want to believe that problems do not exist. Indeed, succumbing to this misconception may well breed ethical complacency.

Inherent conflicts exist in the workplace between, on one hand, personal and organizational values and, on the other, their expression in actions and in decision making. In less defined areas, sometimes rationalization prevails over ethical reflection, causing incongruent action. We may believe, for example, that hon-

esty is essential and that we would never steal our public employer's resources, but *we use the city car to run personal errands while doing project site visits*. Because we observe working hours scrupulously and often put in overtime, *it seems innocent enough to tell our supervisors we got caught in traffic when we actually overslept*. Or, we may know that our coworker is operating a small business of her/his own on the side, using the office telephone, copier, typewriters, paper, and time. *But we have been friends for years, and she/he is a single parent with a son in college. It is unlikely that she/he will be caught if we do not inform anyone, so we do not*.

Wanting to be ethical and consistently being ethical are two different things. Clearly, conflicting loyalties, fear of failure or of being fired, and systems that force us to compromise ethical principles threaten the establishment and maintenance of an ethical workplace.

An ethical dilemma can create conflicts among competing loyalties to country, state, community, constituency groups, government organization, peers, supervisors, family, and self. The challenge is to develop a process to determine which loyalty or loyalties prevail when resolving ethical issues. In prioritizing loyalties, the Josephson Institute emphasizes the primacy of serving the public interest, the reputation of the government, and the integrity and efficiency of the department, even at the cost of injuring a supervisor, peer, or friend. To avoid inappropriate expectations when situations of ethical concern occur, the placement of institutional loyalty above individual loyalty should be made clear to members of the organization.

**2. Ethical people always act ethically regardless of what goes on in the organization.** False! Most people want to do the right thing, but they occasionally find themselves in ethically compromising situations. Good peo-

ple can make bad judgments when organizational ethical support systems are not in place. Hiring ethical people is an important first step in fostering an ethical organization, but it is hardly a last step. Ethics is an individual responsibility and opportunity—one person, one decision at a time. Managers need to develop strategies to inform, inspire, and encourage individuals to act ethically and to hold them accountable if they do not.

Ethics is a force in government organizations that supports such values as accountability and commitment to serving the public interest. Ethics in government is the basis for formulating effective and responsive public policy. A government's ethical foundation must instill confidence in those served; it is not just a matter of feeling good. With every contact between the government and the public, the government should give citizens a reason to believe that officials are making decisions based on the public's interest rather than on personal benefit.

**3. Ethics discussions in public organizations contribute little, if anything, to productivity, morale, or problem solving.** False! Many managers likely believe that it is nice to talk about ethics in the workplace but that such talk matters little when it comes to getting the job done. Indeed, time devoted to ethics discussions or formal training might be viewed as a major distraction from time that could be devoted to providing public services in a more cost-effective fashion. But the evidence, though limited, suggests that the opposite is true. A 1993 study by this article's coauthor, Dr. Menzel, found significant correlations between the presence of a strong ethical climate in local government and the emphasis placed on such values as efficiency, effectiveness, quality, excellence, and teamwork (*Ethics and Public Administration*, pages 191–204; see reference listing).

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As managers, it is important to develop strategies that encourage dialogue on issues with ethical implications and to provide an approach to establishing an ethical workplace. The creation of a shared value system based on ethical principles requires meaningful and serious dialogue through an inclusive, not an exclusive, process. Ethics guidelines set the parameters for appropriate behavior and help translate values into action. The involvement of employees in ethics training and development seminars that allow for questions and confrontations will give individuals the greater confidence they need to take action, resolve problems, and raise productivity.

**4. Ethics can not be learned, taught, or even discussed in any meaningful**

**way.** False! The argument that the only way in which one can acquire ethics is through the crucible of personal experiences, although intuitively appealing, is specious. Ethical persons and ethical workplaces are not simply the products of life or of organization-driven "pinball-like" experiences. Although published data regarding the effects of ethics training on individuals and organizations are accumulating, there is no compelling reason to take a "naturalist" view of how an ethical sense is acquired or transmitted. Rather, ethical behavior is learned behavior, and practice improves performance.

The challenge to managers is to build organizational processes and strategies of ethical reflection and discourse that will encourage employees to take risks toward improving decision-making outcomes. Ethics initiatives and training may not create ethical employees, but they should facilitate decisions that reflect organizational values and purpose. The authors believe that serious ethical contemplation and discussion challenge employees and increase responsiveness to democratic principles. When ethics training is successful, employees become aware of ethical choices and have the knowledge and resources to choose and carry out the right choices.

**5. Only employees who have greater opportunity for ethical failings or shortcomings should be encouraged or required to attend ethics training.** This assumption, too, is false. A successful ethics training initiative must start at the top of the organization, but it is not a real success story until it includes all employees. When employees understand that ethical principles must be the basis for making decisions and that ethical obligations extend beyond compliance with the law or with agency rules, the organization will be known and trusted for its integrity.

Many employees who regard

themselves as ethical often lose sight of the fact that their daily work—their treatment of others within and outside the organization—is more than doing things right. It also is doing the right thing!

Ethical decision making involves employees' knowing their organization's values and its definitions of right and wrong. With this knowledge, workers can act on what is right. It is essential to set up an educational process that increases employees' understanding of the principles of complex situations and that enhances their ability to rank conflicting ethical obligations. Enhanced success comes from infusing into the organization the principles of honesty, integrity, fairness, caring, respect, and accountability as the ground rules for decision making.

**6. Creating and distributing a written ethics policy eliminates any further responsibility of the organization or its leaders.** False! While it is important to have ethics guidelines and to provide those guidelines to employees, this action alone will likely fall short of guiding behavior and can do little toward changing it, when such change is needed. An ethics training initiative is necessary to enhance ethical decision making through a structured problem-solving process. Ethics training must have substance and must address more than just methods of staying out of trouble. It also needs to focus on making government work better in serving the public interest.

As Frank Navran argues, when there is no respect by employees for the organization, sabotage can occur. Such sabotage takes several forms:

- Scapegoating—blaming other people, groups, or departments for missed commitments, bad decisions, or poor results.
- Allowing the manager to fail by withholding information and not pointing out risks.

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- Playing budget games—padding the budget in anticipation of cuts, or going on end-of-the-year spending sprees to match estimates to actual figures.
- Generating endless meetings and memos to ensure that you are covered or that you can distance yourself from a bad decision.
- Avoiding risks—not doing what is needed to succeed because the organization punishes for failure more than it values success.

These behaviors result in low morale, personal stress, and high employee turnover. Such ethical deficits must be addressed by managers if

productivity, high-quality services, and satisfied customers are to be the benchmarks of effective local government.

**7. Appearing to do wrong and actually doing wrong are different matters.** False! The belief that a person's ethics should be judged not by appearance but by facts does not reflect the power of perception. Appearing to do wrong when we actually have done nothing improper may have the same negative impact as doing wrong, or an even greater one. The appearance of impropriety erodes public trust and confidence in government and weakens the principles of accountability, exactly as if the deed had been done. It may, for example, be legal for managers to own investment property in the jurisdictions they manage, but they will have difficulty convincing a skeptical public that they are not using the power of their position for personal gain. The appearance of impropriety is inescapable, regardless of the reality.

**8. An ethical workplace can be achieved quickly.** False! For managers, there can be no more important public service endeavor than working with organization members to establish an ethically aware and sensitive work environment. A fundamental change in the way the organization conducts its affairs will not be achieved by decree. Time, effort, and consistent ethical leadership are necessary.


Ethics management is a leadership task that depends heavily on the ability of the manager to influence, to provide guidance and direction on ethics as a fundamental basis for action. By encouraging employees to concentrate their creative energies, managers can make the organization's ethical vision a reality. Management is needed to take responsibility for, to conduct, and to accomplish the administrative activities necessary to implement ethics initiatives.

Clearly, ethics leadership is a shared organizational responsibility that has profound implications for the democratic processes of government.

### **A Continuous Process**

The achievement and maintenance of an ethical workplace is a challenge for all members of the public organization. The establishment of ethical standards in an age of tolerance and diversity requires shared leadership and commitment throughout the organization. It is important to be alert to false assumptions that act as barriers or obstacles to a work environment that is ethically sensitive.

Public managers must involve themselves continuously, positively, and visibly in educating and empowering employees to act on their

democratic responsibilities. Ethical action and commitment to public service by local government managers and employees must be consistent and reflected throughout the organization. It is from shared leadership and dedication that an ethical workplace is created and maintained in appearance and in fact. 

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