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# Creating an Ethical Work Environment: Enhancing Ethics Awareness in Local Government

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**T**oday's public managers face increasingly complex ethical dilemmas, often having to weigh personal and professional values against current public opinion and the law. In a climate of expanded concern over ethical conduct in government institutions—heightened by a decade of well-publicized cases of both willful and negligent abuses of public trust—administrators confront new challenges in the practice of public service. There is a growing realization among local governments of the cost of unethical behavior and, conversely, of the benefits of ethical behavior.

The various aspects and complexities of ethics in government are an intricate web. Correspondingly, for organization members, the process of resolving ethical situations is like a tangled fishing line—the more you attempt to unravel it the more tangled it becomes. It is clear that a substantial commitment of leadership is needed to enhance organizational effectiveness in dealing with the ethical issues of the 1990s.

## Enhancing Ethical Awareness in the Workplace

To promote ethical decision-making in public organizations by establishing ethics guidelines that reflect the organization's well-defined value system is an excellent approach for local governments. The ethical dilemmas facing public service in the 1990s warrant serious policy action by elected and appointed officials. The creation of an ethics policy and guidelines provides the organizational foundation for employees to evaluate actions that have ethical implications. The strengthening of the ethical framework of the organization is a critical first step in improving the ethical consistency of its actions.

After establishing an ethics policy and presenting it to members of the organization, how does management create increased ethi-

cal awareness in the work environment? Can you teach ethics through a standard employee training development program? Largo, Florida is a medium-sized city of 70,000 population that had successfully created ethics guidelines based on the administrative value system. As Largo's city manager, I had particular interest in exploring the areas of measuring ethical awareness in the organization and the effectiveness of formalized ethics training in employee attitudes and behavior.

## Ethical Climate Survey

To assess accurately the efficacy of ethical initiatives, a benchmark of the ethical beliefs, attitudes, and behavior of employees must be established.

An ethical climate survey can be accomplished efficiently by surveying all employees or by a random employee selection representative of the different personnel classifications and organizational units. To achieve a random selection, every third employee was selected to participate in the survey. A representative sample from the different organizational levels and job classifications enhances accuracy. The number surveyed from each compensation plan—executive management, operational management, supervisory/confidential, union contacts—should reflect the composition of the total workforce. If a particular employee group comprises 10 percent of the total employees, then the employees selected from this group should equal approximately 10 percent of the total surveyed. In order to achieve substantial participation, the following is recommended:

1. Send participating employees a letter of explanation from the city manager requesting cooperation and emphasizing the purpose of the project—to develop an educational program on ethical decision-making.
2. Make participation voluntary, but emphasize the importance of the issue and the need to assess ethical awareness at all

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- levels of the organization.
3. Assure the employees that they were selected randomly and not for any assumed predisposition to unethical behavior.
  4. Inform survey participants that they will remain anonymous throughout the process.
  5. Facilitate the employees' participation by having several survey sites available at convenient times during normal work hours.
  6. Share the survey results with employees when they are final, presenting them as part of the basis for an ethics training program.

The actual questions asked must be selected carefully to increase the validity of the process. (Refer to Figure 1 for sample questions.) The intent of the questions is to determine employees' perceptions of the ethical standards of both the organization and the individuals in it. The survey should request response to such statements as: It is not unusual for members of my department to accept small gifts for performing their duties; I trust my supervisor; and my supervisor sets a good example of ethical behavior. It is also useful to have an open-ended question that asks if there are any practices or behaviors in local government that create ethical problems for the employee. This may indicate an area which should receive particular attention in a training program.

The initial survey is essentially a "pre-test" to establish a level of ethical awareness and understanding to compare with a "post-test" done after completion of ethics training and other initiatives. If the training efforts are successful, there should be a measurable difference in employees' sensitivities to the ethical implications of the way they fulfill their responsibilities. An analysis of the survey results also will reveal any differences between the perceptions of executive management and those of lower-level workers.

## Ethics Training That Works

Many public organizations have recognized the need to do more than establish standards of ethics by giving employees an understanding of why ethical behavior is necessary. There is increased effort by local governments to take the initiative to instill ethical values in employees and to provide them with some form of ethics training. But there are misconceptions about what ethics training should do. Consequently, organizations often find that such training fails to meet their expectations.

Ethics training for all levels of the work force is necessary to ensure that everyone has the same principles, understandings, and resources to assist in responding to ethical dilemmas. The design of training is critical in addressing the needs of different levels of employees and the specific responsibilities of their positions.

### The Ethical Climate Survey

The 10 questions listed below are an example of what can be included in an ethical climate survey. These questions have been excerpted from a 61-question survey that was conducted by City Manager Steve Bonczek of Largo, Florida. A sampling of Largo employees were asked to respond to the questions using the categories of strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree. Their responses were used to design a training program on ethical decision making.

- Members of my department have misused their position to influence the hiring of their relatives and friends in city government.
- Quality is given a high priority in my department.
- There is nothing wrong with accepting gifts from persons who do business with the city so long as those gifts do not influence how I do my job.
- We don't rely too heavily on individual judgment; almost everything is checked.
- My superiors set a good example of ethical behavior.
- I have a large say in decisions that affect my job.
- Members of my department sometimes leak information that benefits persons who do business with the city.
- Public employees like myself should be held to a standard of conduct that is higher than the standard of conduct expected of elected officials.
- During the past 12 months I have observed on-the-job unethical behavior by members of my department.
- Are there any practices or behaviors in city government that are ethical concerns for you? If yes, briefly describe those concerns. **PM**

Figure 1 Sample Survey Questions

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## Establishing an Ethical Basis

Successful ethics training will equip employees with the knowledge and understanding to:

- Recognize the ethical implications of issues as they arise;
- Examine ethical dilemmas objectively and apply reasoned judgment to their resolution;
- Correct unethical practices that previously may have been unrecognized or ignored;
- Handle diplomatically ethical dilemmas that could affect personal relationships; and
- Communicate the need for applying ethical principles at all levels of the organization.

The initial effort to increase ethical awareness should occur at the orientation session for new employees. A discussion of the mission, administrative vision, and values will facilitate an understanding of ethics guidelines in employee behavior and decision making. When the administrative leadership successfully identifies the goals and values of the organization and adheres closely to those goals through effective communication and control, it is easier for employees to recognize ethical difficulties and to bring problems into the open.

Basic information on the ethical practice of government is critical in helping new employees begin public service with the understanding and confidence that will support their decisions in the public interest. The following are areas to be addressed in new employee orientation and training:

1. A clear and concise statement by the chief administrator on expectations concerning the ethical behavior of all employees;
2. The statutes, ordinances, formal code of ethics, regulations, rules, and procedures within which they must operate and the penalties for not observing them;
3. The organization's management philosophy—mission and values—and rules, how the rules are enforced, what safeguards exist against groundless accusations or unfairness, how disciplinary codes are enforced, and what are the appeals procedures;
4. What constitutes ethical practice in government and what are the dilemmas most commonly faced by employees of the city, conflict of interest, outside employment, gifts and favors, information that may or may not be disclosed, political activity, whistleblowing, and so forth, and the resources available to discuss and receive advice about potential ethical dilemmas or clarification about the above areas.

A commitment to empower employees to take action at their level to further organizational goals and values certainly includes the ethical dimension of their work environment.

## What Should Ethics Training Do?

If ethics training and initiatives should not focus primarily on promoting ethical behavior, what is their purpose? Certainly employees' ethical behavior is a desirable goal. The aim, however, of highly effective ethics training and related actions is to provide employees with the tools they need to identify ethics issues and to work out how to resolve them.

Employees are recognizing the need for assistance in identifying potential ethical problems that can be hidden in situations faced daily. Having the tools for identifying and shaping ethical issues may mean simply knowing the right questions to ask. A useful tool is a set of structured questions such as, "What, if any, are the aspects of this situation that might have ethical consequences for me personally, for my supervisor, for the members of my work group or department, for my organization, and for society as a whole?"

The ethics training should provide a process for resolving ethical issues, one that can be demonstrated using case studies on dilemmas. The following steps can be taken in dealing with ethical problems:

1. Define the problem, considering the organization's expressed values and guidelines. What are the facts involved? Are your values in conflict with the policies of the government? With other individuals with whom you must work? With those of the groups or individuals who are most affected by the decision?
2. Determine whether it is an ethical problem or a straightforward administrative decision.
3. Define the desired outcome for the entire situation where ethical issues have been identified. Who will be affected by the decision? Who else needs to be involved in determining a course of action?
4. Identify those elements of the problem that are ethical concerns.
5. Identify difficult obstacles to resolving the ethical issues and determine how to overcome them.
6. Develop alternative solutions to the problem and determine their acceptability from legal, moral, and sound business practice perspectives. Does the solution support the organization's mission and values and the image it wishes to have with elected officials, employees, and citizens?
7. Select the best solution that can be implemented at reasonable cost, both short- and long-term, with a minimum of disruption and with a high probability of success.
8. Resolve the ethical issue.

There are excellent diagnostic tools available in discussing ethical issues and raising awareness of staff through ICMA and the

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American Society for Public Administration (ASPA) publications that provide analysis of ethical dilemmas and explore various aspects of ethics: **Applying Professional Standards and Ethics in the Eighties; Combatting Corruption/Encouraging Ethics (ASPA);** and **Ethical Insight/Ethical Action: The Ethics Factor Training Program (ICMA).**

## How Ethics Training Can Succeed

Successful ethics training requires the support of executive management. Ethics programs work best from the top down. First, high-level managers are trained to identify and resolve ethical issues. They then are able to reinforce the training their employees receive.

The most effective ethics initiatives are comprehensive and pervasive. Periodic reinforcement is important, using such methods as follow-up training and statements from executive management stressing the importance of paying attention to ethical issues.

An "ethics audit" is another means of letting employees know the positive effects of their efforts and emphasizing the desirability of such efforts. Managers are encouraged to review with their employees all decisions on ethical issues, asking, "What did we do right? What did we not do that we should have done? What should we do in future, similar situations?"

Management staff has the responsibility to develop more ethical environments. It is essential that managers be models of the kinds of behavior they expect from their employees. Nothing is more powerful for employees than seeing their managers behave according to their expressed values and standards; nothing is more devastating to the development of an ethical environment than a manager who violates the organization's ethical standards.

The executive staff also can legitimize the decisions about ethical issues in their own departments or divisions. An executive may need to take the initiative in raising ethical issues whenever decisions have to be made. Executives can encourage others to raise these issues and ensure that employees' questions always are given fair hearings.

It is advantageous to use weekly staff meetings to review all discussions and decisions for ethical implications. When a potential problem is identified, a staff member can be assigned to clarify the issue and develop a strategy for resolving it at the next meeting. The staff meeting is also a useful forum for using the diagnostic tools from ICMA and ASPA for discussion and evaluation of ethical issues.

The management staff who are effective in creating ethically aware work environments are clear about the priority given to ethical

concerns. They ensure that the goals set for their departments are not in conflict with the ethical values of the organization. Managers also keep employees continuously aware that ethical considerations are an integral part of their job responsibilities. The performance appraisal can be used to review employee work behavior and results in relation to the organization's expectations regarding ethics. It also is important to address consistently and fairly violations of ethical standards and to acknowledge publicly examples of ethical conduct.

Another important aspect of ethics training is reinforcing the importance of communication and listening to employees. Executive management must have the courage to listen in order to monitor where the organization is to determine where it should be going, and to provide the necessary leadership to move it in the right direction ethically. The grapevine provides an excellent source of information that enhances and complements the more formal methods of communication. It is a good source to determine employee perceptions of the ethical implications of management decisions and the level of acceptance of organization values. To ensure accuracy, the manager must give the grapevine attention so that any misinformation can be corrected.

## Through Specialized Training

An aggressive approach to establishing an ethical work environment through specialized training and related initiatives to reinforce the ethical values of the organization will yield positive results. The ethical climate of an organization can affect the performance and productivity of its employees and their willingness to support such important values as efficiency, effectiveness, quality, and teamwork.

It is clear that ethical awareness can be enhanced through the development of ethics guidelines that reflect organizational values and individual accountability. A training program that focuses on preparing employees through case studies, diagnostic reviews, periodic ethics audits, and consistent dialogue at staff meetings and in organization newsletters will increase chances for success. The challenge for executive management is to increase employees' understanding of ethical implications in the workplace and their ability to use a structured process to resolve ethical dilemmas.

An ethical organization, in perception and in fact, is a fundamental requirement of a democratic government. If public managers are to fulfill the leadership responsibility of serving the public interest in a way that inspires confidence and trust, then ethics initiatives and training are essential. **PM**