

## ETHICS IN PUBLIC ORGANIZATIONS

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### Contents

1. Introduction
  2. Ethics at the Institutional Level
  3. Ethics at the Organizational Level
    - 3.1 Prevention, Investigation, and Prosecution
    - 3.2 Leadership and Organizational Culture
  4. Ethics at the Individual Public Servant Level
  5. Conclusion
- Acknowledgements  
Glossary  
Bibliography  
Biographical Sketch

### Summary

This article focuses on ethical standards expected of public servants, and how these standards might be promoted in order to influence behavior. It is recognized that the ways these ethical standards are devised, communicated, and enforced are impacted greatly by the system in which the public servant is functioning. Therefore, this article examines ethics at three levels: 1. the *institutional* level, where attention is focused on creating a well-functioning government that can effectively deter and redress corruption; 2. the *organizational* level, where organizational mechanisms are needed in order to support and encourage ethical behavior in all departments or levels of government; and 3. the *individual* public servant level, where it is necessary to know the core values of public service ethics, and to be prepared to exercise good judgment in the face of a variety of pressures and constraints. An institutional level ethics framework provides a necessary foundation for ethical action. However, organizational level leaders who model ethical behavior, and an organizational culture steeped in core public service values, are also essential elements of a successful approach to public service ethics. In the end, though, it is the individual public servant who must have habits of the heart and mind that are guided by a true commitment to public service values.

### 1. Introduction

Ethics are the standards by which behavior is evaluated. Some standards of behavior are almost universally valued—such as honesty, respect for others, and trustworthiness—and those who violate these ethical standards are evaluated negatively. Sometimes, however, the standards by which we evaluate behavior are influenced by the profession,

position, or relationship ties of the person taking the action. For that reason we find that the ethical standards applied to specific positions (e.g. public officials, doctors, lawyers, military personnel, clergy) reflect the roles and relationships common to that position.

This article focuses on ethical standards applicable to public servants, usually to elected and career public servants alike, but with occasional differences noted between elected and career public officials. Because they hold positions in government, public servants are expected to treat their positions as a public trust, and behave only in ways that respect the power and authority the public has placed in that person and the government position they hold. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) examined publications of the 29 member countries, to find statements of the values intended to guide public servants in their daily operations. The most frequently stated public service values were:

- Impartiality
- Legality
- Integrity
- Transparency
- Efficiency
- Equality
- Responsibility
- Justice

These core public service values are the common standards by which we evaluate the behavior of public servants, and are informed by democratic principles, social norms, and professional ethics. Public organizations are challenged to find ways to institutionalize these ethical values, and hold public servants accountable for behaving in accordance with the standards. To some extent public service ethics can be codified in laws or regulations intended to define expected or prohibited behavior. But such efforts usually succeed only in delineating the most egregious conduct to be avoided by public servants, and the minimum standards of expected behavior. Codes of ethics are another approach to stating shared values. There are two types of codes of ethics: a detailed and enforceable code of ethics like the International City and County Management Association's code of ethics, or a code of ethics intended to be a statement of ideals or aspirations (but not precise enough to be enforceable) such as the American Society for Public Administration's code of ethics.

It is widely recognized that laws, rules, and regulations intended to codify public service ethics are *necessary*, but are *not sufficient* to achieve the desired end of upholding the highest standards of ethical behavior among public servants. Behavior that does not explicitly violate laws, regulations, or enforceable codes of ethics might still be evaluated negatively because that behavior falls short of the aspirations implied by a core value and implicitly expected by the public of their public servants. Therefore, it is necessary to go beyond these basic codes or laws. Public organizations must foster organization cultures that embody, encourage, and reward core public service values. It is also necessary for public servants—as individual moral actors—to internalize these values in such a way that the values become habits of the mind and heart guiding every decision and action.

In the contemporary environment in which governments often contract with businesses and non-governmental organizations to provide public services, it is not clear that the same ethical standards are used for evaluating the behavior of these contractors who are not public servants. In order to assure clarity, then, the focus of this article will be on public (government) organizations and on public servants. The ways in which public service ethics are promoted at three levels—the institutional level, the organizational level, and the individual level—will be addressed sequentially. Since many institutional mechanisms for promoting ethics are discussed in chapters dealing with corruption and reform, this aspect will be touched upon only briefly here. More attention will be given to the methods by which ethical standards of behavior are promoted at the organizational level, meaning specific government departments or offices. At this organizational level one can expect to find an organizational culture that influences the behavior, norms, and values of an identifiable group of people serving the same organizational mission. Ethical norms and standards are communicated and reinforced through this organizational culture, and therefore it can be viewed as a powerful mechanism for promoting public service ethics. Finally, public service ethics will be addressed at the level of the individual public servant, exploring factors that are likely to lead these individuals to make judgments and decisions using core public service values as they go about their jobs on a daily basis. Here the focus will be on factors that lead individuals to behave in an exemplary fashion, according to the highest ideals of public service values.

## **2. Ethics at the Institutional Level**

When viewing public service ethics at the government-wide or institutional level, attention focuses primarily on creating a well-functioning government that can effectively deter and redress corruption. Every government, regardless of culture or level of economic development, experiences corruption of one form or another. Research conducted by the International Monetary Fund measures the quality of governance in countries throughout the world and establishes a causal link between good governance and better development outcomes. They define governance as (1) the process by which governments are selected, held accountable, monitored, and replaced; (2) the capacity of governments to manage resources efficiently and formulate, implement, and enforce sound policies and regulations; and (3) the respect of citizens and the state for the institutions that govern economic and social interactions among them. The measures of good governance include dimensions of ethics such as the control of corruption and the rule of law, and document a clear relationship between good governance and improvements in measures such as infant mortality and per capita income. The non-governmental organization Transparency International (TI) has played a major role in ensuring that international organizations and national governments give a high priority to curbing corruption. Transparency International's purpose is broadly defined as intending to assure that governments operate fairly, efficiently, and effectively on behalf of the public. TI recognizes that corruption is perhaps the most insidious and damaging of the reasons a government may fail to meet these obligations to the public. Therefore, combating corruption has been the focal point of TI's efforts. Transparency International outlines a variety of institutional level approaches needed to combat corruption and enhance government integrity, including:

- Mechanisms to support accountability and transparency in democratic processes, particularly election processes;
- Building partnerships between government and civil society organizations to enhance the role of civil society;
- Countering conflicts of interest and enacting administrative reforms in the public service;
- Establishing mechanisms that provide citizens and public officials with channels for reporting alleged acts of corruption or abuse of authority;
- Assuring independence of the judiciary, and legal remedies for the effective deterrence to corruption;
- Transparent and competitive systems of public procurement;
- A free press capable of discharging its role as public watchdog and increasing public awareness of rights and responsibilities;
- Creation of independent anti-corruption agencies and international cooperation efforts to assist in combating corruption.

Without such institutional mechanisms as *democratic elections, a free press, an independent judiciary, a robust civil society, and clear legal guidelines regarding corruption, procurement, and administrative procedures*, no government can provide assurance that widely accepted public service values will be the norm. At the level of society-wide institutions, an adequate framework of integrity will include those fundamental dimensions. Without the support of this larger framework, anti-corruption laws have little meaning. History shows that the institutional framework of integrity develops only when the citizenry demands it, and when high levels of political will and strong leadership are present. External influences such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, World Bank, United Nations, the International Monetary Fund or Transparency International do set standards for government integrity, and provide certain incentives for complying with these standards, but in the end no government achieves high levels of public service ethics without the internal leadership, political will, and capacity to build the institutional framework for integrity. But the institutional framework for integrity is only one step in the overall effort to assure high standards of public service ethics. Organizational level initiatives and a focus on individual public servants are equally important.

### **3. Ethics at the Organizational Level**

If we assume that the institutional framework of integrity (described above) exists at the national level, it remains necessary to build strong organizational mechanisms to support and encourage ethical behavior in all departments and levels of government. The significance of having an organizational level ethics program was confirmed by research carried out by the Ethics Resource Center in Washington, DC. The ERC conducted a survey of employees in large public, private, and nonprofit organizations in 1994 and again in 2000. The findings suggest that when organizations have ethics programs containing written standards, training for employees, and means for employees to get ethics advice, then employees:

- Feel less pressure to compromise ethical standards;
- Observe less misconduct in the organization;

- Are more satisfied with the organization’s response to reported misconduct;
- Are more satisfied with the organization; and
- Feel more valued by the organization.

Employees report those same positive results when leaders and managers in the organization serve as models of ethical behavior, while the failure of leaders to model ethical behavior undermines any other organizational ethics effort. The research also found that senior and middle managers are consistently more positive about the ethics of their organization than are lower level employees. This suggests that the experiences of lower level employees are not addressed as effectively in ethics programs as are the experiences of senior and middle managers.

At the organizational level, approaches to enhancing ethical conduct commonly include:

- Mechanisms for prevention, investigation and prosecution of unethical behavior;
- Audit and control functions;
- Secure methods for the reporting of misconduct, and “whistleblower protections” forbidding retaliation against those who report misconduct;
- Accountability mechanisms applied fairly throughout the organization; and
- An organizational culture which values high ethical standards, and leadership to maintain such a culture.

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Transparency International [www.transparency.org](http://www.transparency.org) [provides information on the anti-corruption efforts of various international partnerships.]

### **Biographical Sketch**

**Kathryn G. Denhardt**, Ph.D. is an Associate Professor and Policy Scientist at the University of Delaware School of Urban Affairs and Public Policy. She coordinates the Organizational Leadership area of specialization for the Masters in Public Administration Program. Her teaching and research interests include administrative ethics, performance management, and civic engagement. She works extensively with citizen groups and with practitioners in the public and nonprofit sectors, particularly in the areas of facilitating multi-stakeholder decisions that are collaborative, democratic, and ethical..