

ETHICS AND VALUES



Definitions

Effective leadership by government officials usually requires their strong commitment to high performance in the area of ethics and values. But what do these two terms mean? The terms ethics and values are often used interchangeably but they do not mean the same thing. *Ethics* refers to standards and principles of right conduct, whereas *values* are enduring beliefs that influence our attitudes and actions. *Ethical values* then are enduring beliefs as to what constitutes right and wrong behaviour.

Rules on ethics are statements that identify specific acts as either ethical or unethical. For most practical purposes, the terms ethics and *morality* can be used synonymously. Also important is the relationship between law and ethics in that an action that is lawful may nevertheless be unethical. While terms like ethical and unethical are widely used to refer to the conduct of both politicians and public servants, the concept of values tends to be used more commonly in reference to the public service.

Unethical Behaviour

Certain kinds of unethical behaviour are described as *corruption*, or corrupt practices. The World Bank defines corruption as “the abuse of public office for private gain.” This definition is very similar to that of the ethical offence known as *conflict of interest* – a situation in which a public official has a private or personal interest sufficient to influence, or to appear to influence, the objective exercise of his or her official duties.

In most countries, conflict of interest is the most prevalent ethical problem-area. It has many variations, and even the appearance of conflict of interest can have a negative effect on the public’s trust and confidence in government. Among the variations of conflict of interest are *accepting benefits* – a politician or public servant accepts a gift or other benefit from a person with whom he or she does business in an official capacity; *influence peddling* – an official solicits a benefit in return for giving preferential treatment to someone outside government; and *using government property* – an official uses government facilities or equipment for private purposes.

Conflicts of interest receive a great deal of public and media attention, but there are many other kinds of ethical offences, including

- unauthorized disclosure of government information;
- invasion of individual privacy;
- abuse of public funds; and
- harm to the health of individuals or the environment.

Ethical Dimensions of Government

The ethical dimension of government is a remarkably pervasive one that needs to be considered along with political, legal, financial and other factors in the making and implementation of public policy. It is the power and influence wielded by politicians and public servants that raises concerns about their ethics and values.

While elected officials have the final say on policy decisions, public servants exercise power by taking decisions on matters that have been delegated to them, and they exercise influence by advising politicians on policy issues. Public servants’ exercise of administrative discretion in the performance of these functions gives them many opportunities to act ethically – or unethically.



Ethical Leadership

Among the major means of promoting *ethical conduct* and countering corrupt practices are ensuring ethical and values-based leadership, providing training on ethics and values, and adopting ethics rules or codes and statements of values. It is widely acknowledged that leadership is the single most important influence on the *ethical behaviour* of government officials. Ethical leadership requires not only that top officials provide an exemplary role model but also that they develop a program or framework to promote ethics and values in their organization. It is, for example, important that all officials be encouraged to become familiar with the *core values* of their government and with the ethics rules flowing from those values.

While *rules and values* are both essential to maintaining and fostering proper conduct in government, many countries have begun to place relatively more emphasis on values. South Africa has even enshrined *public service values* in its constitution. Since the mid-1980s, ethics rules have been increasingly complemented by statements of values that set out the foundation on which not only ethics rules but rules in general are based. For example, conflict-of-interest rules are based on values of *integrity and fairness*. Values are also being classified in various ways. One classification divides values as follows:

- ethical values (e.g., honesty);
- democratic values (e.g., accountability);
- professional values (e.g., efficiency); and
- people values (e.g., caring).

The *leadership challenge* is to promote a *culture of commitment* to shared values that will encourage officials to do the right thing without constant reference to rules. It is now generally acknowledged that leadership occurs at all levels of the governmental hierarchy. Thus, it is essential that not only top politicians and senior public servants but that all other public officials as well be sensitized to the importance of high performance in the sphere of ethics and values.

Ethical Frameworks

Frameworks for developing an ethical and values-based regime for government have been provided by international entities such as:

- Transparency International. *TI's National Integrity System Approach*. Berlin: TI, 2005. Available at http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/nis.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. *Principles for Managing Ethics in the Public Service. Puma Policy Brief No. 4*. Paris: OECD, 1998. Available at <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/60/13/1899138.pdf>.

Both the World Bank and the United Nations have also developed vigorous programs against unethical conduct by public officials.

Readings

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