Impact of Accountability and Ethics on Public Service Delivery: A South African Perspective

Learn how South Africa's Constitution of 1996, by requiring all government departments to observe particular codes of conduct, is attempting to improve accountability and ethics in public service delivery— specifically at the local level.

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Introduction

Ethics are as important for the public servant as blood for the body. The public sector, like individuals, is constantly changing through new leadership, environmental influences, and sociopolitical development. Government and society cannot promote and enforce ethical behavior solely through the utilization of ethical codes of conduct or the promulgation of a plethora of legislation. Social mindsets often are still entangled in a micro-ethic paradigm. People tend to think of moral values and norms as applying only to personal relations. South Africa needs an organizational culture that not only supports ethical behavior, but sees that it also defines and underpins right and wrong conduct individually and institutionally. The concept of interrelatedness corresponds with the African concept of *ubuntu*, which means brotherliness and good neighborliness. What affects one's brother, directly or indirectly, also affects oneself.

In South Africa, the proliferation of ethical codes of conduct, public accountability, and the promulgation of a number of pieces of legislation will likely fail to thwart unethical behavior unless the public and public officials are inculcated with particular dispositions, attitudes, and virtues for guiding human conduct. For example, because public officials in South Africa operate in a diverse society, their ethical convictions and accountability to its populace are bound to be tested.

Training in ethics is essential to ensure that officials act confidently, knowing they have organizational support, rendering efficient, effective, ethical, and accountable public service.

The South African government has launched an ambitious initiative—Batho Pele, or "people first"—a public service improvement program across the nation at all levels. One element of this program is the change management engagement, which promotes a new public service belief set: "We belong, we care, we serve." To comply with Batho Pele, departments must set and measure standards for each of their services. Batho Pele uses visits, spot-checks, and inspections to assess compliance with its requirements.

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Comparison of Public-Sector Ethics

Table 1 compares public-sector ethics in the twentieth century with what one might envisage for public-sector ethics in the twenty-first century. Era-specific ethics can neither contribute to public service quality, nor offer a more equitable distribution of scarce resources in the twenty-first century and beyond.

Ethics and the Public Sector

The question of ethics is linked with the history of mankind. Ethics deals with the character, conduct, and morals of human beings. It deals with good or bad and right or wrong behavior, evaluates conduct using absolute criteria, and puts negative or positive values on it. Ethics differs from law, because it involves no formal sanctions; from etiquette, because it goes beyond mere social convention; from religion, because it makes no theological assumptions; from aesthetics, because it is aimed at conduct and character rather than objects; and from prudence, because it goes beyond the self-interests of others. Ethics is both a process of inquiry and code of conduct. As a code of conduct, it is like an inner eye that enables people to see the rightness or wrongness of their actions.

Ethics has to do with the actions of man. Consequently, it requires adjustments in the actions and attitudes of the public manager in relation to colleagues and the public, as well as in relation to self. Ethical values and integrity as a basic value as well as the rule of law are key elements of every democratic society. In their daily execution of their functions and management of public funding, public officials dispose of discretionary competencies. These values not only must protect the citizens against arbitrary use of this public power, but also the public authority itself against any improper use of this power by its public officials. The public officials themselves must be protected against any abuse or diversion of law or authority on behalf of the public authority or its official bodies.

Ethical behavior is essential for an effective and stable political-administrative authority as well as social and economic structures. Corruption can disturb economic competition and endanger free trade and the stability on which the free market economy is based. Moreover, ethics must be seen as an ongoing activity and not as a status to be attained. Ethics does not just concern establishing a set of rules or code of conduct, but is an ongoing management process that underpins the work of government. Indeed, as Denhardt says, ethics are not a set of rules or values waiting to be dis-

Table 1. Comparison of Public-Sector Ethics	
Twentieth Century Ethics	**Twenty-First Century Ethics**
Determinants—ruling elites	Determinants—authentic discourse among all who will be affected
Common ethical code—belief in final solutions	Constantly managing codes—on the basis of continuous authentic discourse
Support guaranteed through coercion	Support guaranteed through consensus
Dissenters subject to punitive measures	Dissenters not subject to punitive measures
Western (colonial) ethics	Ethics based on anthropological and sociological pluralism
Corporate accountability (amounts to non-accountability)	Personal accountability
Exercise of personal morality stifled and discouraged	Exercise of personal morality encouraged
Exercise of personal discretion discouraged	Exercise of discretion encouraged
Public interest nebulous, determined by governing elites	Public interests disparate but relatively distinct, determined with all involved (authentic discourse), constantly redefined

Source: Sardar, in Clapper, 1999, p. 149.

covered that provides all the answers. In the complex world of public administration, norms and values rarely provide clear-cut answers to difficult problems. Ethics should be thought of as helping to frame relevant questions about what government ought to be doing and how public administration ought to go about achieving those purposes (Denhardt, in Hondeghem, 1998:29).

Neutrality

One of the earliest norms in public administration was that of neutrality: public officials should be apolitical policy implementation functionaries rather than policymakers. Within the context of public administration, the emphasis on norms is associated with the recommendation of certain values that are viewed as desirable by their promoters.

There are concerns that with recruitment of personnel from the private sector, public-sector norms and values need to be reinforced. Thompson (in Hondeghem, 1998:27) notes that since those who serve government come from more diverse backgrounds and begin with fewer values in common, the rules of government ethics are likely to become more important and more explicit.

Values

The common denominator of nearly all people problems is found in the area of values. Values differ widely from person to person and from culture to culture. The influence of values on people's thinking, acting, and behavior is underestimated. McMurry tells us that the influence of values on the individual is powerful:

■ They principally determine what one regards as right, good, worthy, beautiful, and ethical.

■ They provide the standards and norms by which one guides day-to-day behavior.

■ They chiefly determine one's attitudes toward political, economic, social, industrial, and other causes and issues with which one comes into contact daily.

■ They determine the ideas, principles, and concepts one can accept, assimilate, remember, and transmit without distortion.

> Ethics does not just concern establishing a set of rules or code of conduct, but is an ongoing management process that underpins the work of government.

In spite of the above, individuals may temporarily or permanently discard their value systems in favor of specific goal attainment.

The importance of articulating ethics and the values that define and underpin the public service cannot be overemphasized. It is critical in providing both public officials and the public with a common frame of reference regarding the principles and standards to be applied and in assisting public officials to develop an appreciation of the ethical issues involved in effective and efficient public service delivery.

Seven Principles of Public Life

An example of the importance attached to the above-mentioned ethical principles is found in Table 2, "Seven Principles of Public Life," by the Nolan Committee in the United Kingdom. These principles, which are set out for the benefit of all who serve the public, provide a valuable framework for evaluating recent experience and for considering the future.

Normative Criteria for Public Service Delivery

From the large body of knowledge on normative guidelines for public service delivery, a universally acceptable code of conduct is clearly viewed as necessary for public officials to ethically perform their activities. In Table 3, we propose normative criteria as a foundation for effective and efficient public service delivery at the local level. These normative criteria are based upon values, attitudes, and aptitudes that can be measured or evaluated. They constitute a point of departure for the implementation and maintenance of acceptable, effective, and efficient public service delivery.

Table 2. Seven Principles of Public Life

Selflessness	Public officials should take decisions solely in terms of the public interest. They should not do so in order to gain financial or other material benefits for themselves, their family, or their friends
Integrity	Holders of public office should not place themselves under any financial or other obligation to outside individuals or organizations that might influence them in the performance of their official duties.
Objectivity	In carrying out public business, including making public appointments, awarding contracts, or recommending individuals for rewards and benefits, holders of public office should make their choices on merit.
Accountability	Holders of public office are accountable for their decisions and actions to the public and must submit themselves to whatever scrutiny is appropriate to their office.
Openness	Holders of public office should be as open as possible about all the decisions and actions that they take. They should give reasons for their decisions and restrict information only when the wider public interest demands it.
Honesty	Holders of public office have a duty to declare any private interests relating to their public duties and to take steps to resolve any conflicts arising in a way that protects the public interest.
Leadership	Holders of public office should promote and support these principles by leadership and example.

Source: The Nolan Committee's Principles of Public Life (Chapman, 2000:230–231).

Table 3. Normative Criteria for Effective and Efficient Public Service Delivery

Values	Attitudes	Aptitudes
■ Integrity	■ Transparency	■ Knowledge
■ Transparency	■ Responsibility	■ Acceptance and comprehension of goals and functioning of administrative institutions
■ Publicity	■ Quality awareness	
■ Accountability	■ Legibility	■ Leadership qualities
■ Equity	■ Clarity	■ Communication skills
■ Nondiscrimination	■ Simplicity	■ Social skills
■ Quality	■ Inquisitiveness	■ Independence
■ Professionalism	■ Adaptability	■ Ability to use experience
■ Reliability	■ Listening ability	■ Ability to further education and training
■ General interest	■ Involvement	
	■ Speed	■ Analytical capability
	■ Effectiveness	■ Sense of renewal
	■ Efficiency	

Recommendations

The South African Public Service Commission's State of the Public Service Report, February 2005, recommended attention to the following areas to ensure ethical, accountable, efficient, and effective public service delivery:

■ Since there is an unclear link between the National Corruption Strategy and departmental strategies, training on integrated ethics management should be provided to all managers.

■ Continued research and information on ethics management is needed to ensure accurate and reliable information.

■ Departments should specifically address Batho Pele service delivery improvement plans (SDIPs) in their annual reports.

■ Government has addressed the need for fairness in service delivery through, for example, the Promotion of Administrative Justice Act of 2000 (PAJA). Research reveals that compliance by departments with the provisions of the act is very disappointing. Increased training should be provided to all officials on the PAJA; financial support should be provided to civil society organizations working in this area.

■ Capacity and capability will need to be built systematically and incrementally to build public service accountability.

■ An accreditation system for public service managers will help ensure that appointees have the skills and experience required for their work.

■ Create a specialist capacity that will support departments in difficulty. Such capacity should be established to undertake thorough problem analysis, design appropriate solutions, and support project implementation.

■ Assign priority to implementating departmental risk management and fraud prevention plans.

■ The flow of credible information in line with the Batho Pele principles will enhance the sense of ownership of government programs and processes by the beneficiaries.

■ Structure annual reports so that they directly reflect plans presented in the national and provincial expenditure estimates. This will allow a clearer comparison of performance against plans and budgets.

An ethical code of conduct, adherence to accountability principles, and appropriate training can make a difference in the ethical dilemmas of public officials, particularly with regard to effective and efficient service delivery. An ethical code of conduct is necessary to guide the public official in public service rendering to the community as well as to safeguard against unfair demands by the community. This conduct leads to the promotion of a positive image of the public service.

Summary

Openness with regard to decision making, participation, and a public say is a necessity. An adjustment of attitudes and actions in South Africa lies in contact and communication across racial, cultural, language, and geographical boundaries. Normative communication between the political parties and the government within each of their own electorates is of prime importance. A code of conduct goes a long way in providing a suitable climate in which an ethical culture can thrive and promote a professional ethos among public officials at all levels. However, the code of conduct only becomes meaningful if there are measures to enforce it in order to provide for sanctions as well as disciplinary activities.

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