

# UNDERSTANDING AND MAINTAINING ETHICAL VALUES IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR THROUGH AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO LEADERSHIP

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**Abstract:** Within the public-sector where leaders are held accountable to a wide variety of citizenry and stakeholders, public leaders are often expected to meticulously conform to standards higher than those aligned with personal morality. Accordingly, several scholars and practitioners have attempted to address the issue of ethics in public administration. Yet, many of the values which have frequently been associated with ethics in the public-sector are often explored independent of the broader subject of leadership. In general, however, many of the values commonly associated with theories of leadership, such as transformational and transactional, can similarly be associated with the ethical values and expectations of public officials—potentially allowing for the incorporation of these ethical considerations into an integrated approach to public-sector leadership. Thus, this paper is an attempt to explore the subject of public-sector ethics and its relevance to an integrated leadership approach (where ethical considerations are incorporated into a leadership framework that includes both transactional and transformational factors).

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*“In leadership we see morality magnified, and that is why the study of ethics is fundamental to our understanding of leadership”*

(Antonakis, Cianciolo, & Sternberg, 2004, p. 302)

## **UNDERSTANDING AND MAINTAINING ETHICAL VALUES IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR THROUGH AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO LEADERSHIP**

Ethics and leadership have often been thought of as mutually-reinforcing concepts. Leadership can loosely be defined as actions which influence and direct the performance of others towards the achievement of organizational and/or collective goals. Ethics, for the most part, can be defined as an internal set of moral codes and reasoning based upon societal and prescriptive norms. Thus, ethical appropriateness in regard to leader behavior is oftentimes evaluated in terms of abstract and highly idealistic concepts regarding individual’s prescriptive beliefs of how leaders *ought* to behave. As such, within the public-sector where leaders are called upon to uphold differing and even contradictory levels of ethical responsibility it has increasingly become expected that leaders meet many of the prototypical and idealized expectations of those in which they represent.

In an era where high profile lapses by public-sector leaders in ethical and moral judgment are frequently exposed, citizens have come to expect increasingly higher standards of ethical conduct as a broad range of activities are now viewed as immoral (Bowman, 1990). Increasing awareness and changing societal values have been linked to the public’s interest in ethics management (Maesschalck, 2004/5). Accordingly, citizens have become more assertive and

demanding toward leaders in the public-sector showing less tolerance for leaders' mistakes, shortcomings, and structural challenges. As such public leaders are generally expected to meticulously conform to standards higher than those aligned with personal morality (Lewis, 1991). Thus public leaders can often find this expectation to maintain collectively high and even idealistic levels of ethical responsibility to be quite overwhelming. In his commentary entitled *Public administration in a global mode*, Gawthrop (2005) states that "as international government systems become more commonplace, the responsibility for promoting the ethical-moral values of democracy rests most directly on the public managers and policymakers of democratic systems" (p. 241).

The common method in attempting to deal with the ethical responsibility of public officials has been the promulgation of codes, policies, and other guidance standards. Accordingly, there has been a proliferation of scholars and practitioners attempting to address the issue of ethics within public administration through ethical recommendations, suggestions, and various guidance principles. Goss (1996) states that:

Within the last two decades or so there has been an outpouring of written works on the subject of ethics, particularly the ethics of those in government service. Numerous writers have identified ethical problems in government, called for moral reform and the enactment of ethics laws and codes, posited what are or should be the components of a bureaucratic and/or democratic ethos for public administration, identified one or more ideals or elements of such a moral guide, hypothesized about a grand theory of administrative ethics and the duties of bureaucrats, explored subject specific dilemmas in government policies, urged the teaching of ethics within the schools of public

administration and public affairs, and suggested ethical guidance for practitioners of public management. (p. 573)

Yet given this recent focus on ethics in the public service, the subject of administrative ethics has often been explored independent of the broader subject of leadership. In general, the ethics of leadership and leaders' degree of moral development are increasingly becoming essential elements of private-sector and mainstream leadership research (e.g. Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Howell, 1988). However, as Van Wart (2003) notes, "administrative leadership research has experienced neither the volume nor the integration of the mainstream (p. 215)...literature about administrative leadership is dispersed in topics such as reform, ethics, and management, and an explicit focus on the detailed dynamics of leadership is largely lacking" (p. 224). Further, in addressing the fragmentation of the administrative leadership literature, Wan Wart (2003) adds that:

Part of the weakness in the literature resides in its nonintegrated character...The serious debate about the best style to use is cut into many parts and is rarely as explicitly or holistically discussed as in the mainstream...The ethics-values literature, for all of its normative robustness, generally offers few concrete recommendations...beyond general admonitions to be responsive, trustworthy, honest, courageous, and prudent. (pp. 223-224)

Several individuals have speculated as to why administrative ethics and leadership has failed to develop as in the private-sector and the mainstream. Weber (1947) suggests that public bureaucracies were created to minimize human touch and maximize standardization through

impersonal rules, procedures, and codes. Thus, through this line of reasoning it can be argued that the impersonal nature of the field provides an opportunity for public leaders to minimize the ethical dimensions of their decisions. Terry (1995) further speculates that there may also be a perception by some that the sector is guided by powerful forces which extends beyond the control of the administrative leader. Additionally, Terry (1995) speculates that there may even be an assumption that administrative leadership does not (or should not) exist due to an instrumental approach to leadership within the sector.

Thus considering (a) the proliferation of scholarly and practitioner views relating to the ethical dimensions of public administration and the ethical role of the public administrator, and (b) the fragmentation of ethics and leadership values within the sector, it is certainly imaginable to believe that public officials may rely on a philosophy of “either or,” rather than “both and” when addressing the issue of ethics in leadership. This paper is an attempt to collectively explore the topics of public-sector ethics and integrated leadership as it relates to maintaining an ethical public-sector environment. The paper will examine (a) the multiplicity of views relating to the ethical roles, expectations, and obligations of public leaders and the moral foundations of the sector, and (b) aspects of transformational and transactional leadership that can be considered relevant to administrative ethics.

## **ETHICAL AND MORAL VALUES IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION**

Ethics and public service values are important elements in comprising the “body and soul” of public administration (Menzel, 2003). Accordingly, several scholars and practitioners have sought to identify and understand the ethical responsibility of the public administrator (see

Berman & West 1997; Bohte & Meier, 2000; Bowman 1990; Bruce 1996; Burke and Black 1990; Menzel 1992, 1993, 1995a, 1995b, 1996, 2005; Zajac & Comfort 1997; Zajac & Al-Kazemi 2000), and have also attempted to offer applied ethical guidance and structured theoretical frameworks for use within the sector (Cody & Lynn, 1992; Cooper, 1990; Denhardt, 1988; Rohr, 1978). From ethical principals to recommendations, scholars and practitioners have attempted to classify what are, or should be, the foundations of administrative ethics, the appropriate ethical behaviors of public leaders, and the ethical role of the public administrator. Yet, very often the subject of administrative ethics and the ethical qualities considered fundamental to the public administrator's role are explored independent of values which are also associated with leadership.

In his book *Ethics for bureaucrats: An essay on law and values*, Rohr (1978) argues that regime values are the normative foundations of administrative ethics. He later defines regime values as the values of the political entity "brought into being by the ratification of the Constitution that created the American republic" (p. 59). Frederickson (1983) however calls for a renewal of civic virtue in defining a central value of public administration, and Cooper (1991) similarly argues that public administration should seek its ethical identity in the ethical tradition of citizenship. Accordingly, Stivers (2001) sets forth the major ingredients of a citizenship ethic in public administration as authoritative judgment, the public interest, citizenship as education, and community.

Further in addressing the moral and ethical obligations of public administrators, Moore (1976) states that public-sector obligations arise from three different realms which includes: (1) respecting the processes that legitimate the actions of public officials, (2) serving the public interest, and (3) treating colleagues and subordinates with respect, honesty, and fairness. Hart

(1984) argues that public administration is a “moral endeavor” that requires special moral obligations and unique moral character. While Stewart (1985) similarly notes that “the role of a public administrator carries a kind of moral weight not found in private sector counterpart roles” (p. 490).

Bailey (1965) suggests that the ethical dilemmas facing public administrators requires specific attitudes that must be aligned with unique moral qualities, and Waldo (1980) identifies more than a dozen sources of obligations relevant to the conduct of the public administrator’s role. Cooper (1987) further presents twenty specific virtues that directly relate to three broad “realms of obligation” for public servants, and Denhardt (1991) identifies the “moral foundations” of a public administrator’s role as honor, benevolence, and justice; while Cohen & Eimicke (1995) reduce Carol Lewis’ (1991) twenty-one rules of thumb for the ethical behavior of a public administrator to five simple principles: (1) obey the law, (2) serve the public interest, (3) avoid doing harm, (4) take individual responsibility for the process and its consequences, and (5) treat incompetence as an abuse of office.

Warwick (1981), in identifying some of the common ethical dilemmas faced by public officials in the exercise of discretion, offers five ethical principles of guidance: (1) the exercise of discretion should serve the public interest, (2) public officials should push back bounds on rationality so that deliberation may take place, (3) public officials should provide truthfulness in the discharge of official responsibilities, (4) public officials should demonstrate procedural respect, and (5) public officials should exercise restraints on the means chosen to accomplish organizational ends. Warwick (1981) further specifies the four sources of ethical decision making by public-sector leaders as public interest, constituency interests, personal interest, and bureaucratic interest. Similarly Cooper (1990) identifies the sources as individual attributes,

organizational structure, organizational culture, and societal expectations. In his article *Integrity in the public-sector*, Dobel (1990) states that “public officials need a complex array of moral resources to exercise discretion,” (p. 354) and that adequate discretion by public officials “should be seen as an iterative process among three mutually supporting realms of judgment” (p. 354). Thus he argues that regime accountability, personal responsibility, and prudence are the keys to ethical decision making for individuals in the public-sector (Dobel, 1990).

Further in addressing even the possibility of administrative ethics, Thompson (1985) claims that administrative ethics is possible if the field can overcome “the burdensome commitment to neutrality and the aversion to assigning individual responsibility for collective actions” (p. 555). However O’Kelly & Dubnick (2005) unconvinced of this position argue that:

[The world of a public administrator] is a world of multiple, diverse, and often conflicting expectations (Dubnick & Romzek 1993)...Effectively operating under such conditions renders the possibility of administrative ethics, in the sense posited by Thompson...incomplete and inappropriate, if not impossible. (pp. 395-396)

In general, leaders in the public-sector are expected to maintain a level of morality and integrity which serves the interests of society while at the same time demonstrates personal responsibility, diplomacy, and truthfulness. Thus given these views, many people might say that the ethical role of the public administrator can be summed up as follows: *serve the public interest while being fair, honest, lawful, trustworthy, and doing the least amount harm*. However, it is impossible to fully understand the ethical responsibility associated with the public administrator’s role, and the means needed to maintain an ethical public-sector environment

when explored independent of the broader subject of leadership. Leadership is fraught with ethical challenges, and potentially even more so within the public-sector where leaders are held accountable to a wide variety of citizenry and stakeholders. Although not a comprehensive overview, the next section will explore various aspects transactional and transformational theories of leadership and their relationship to ethics and morality.

## **ETHICAL AND MORAL VALUES IN TRANSACTIONAL AND TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP**

In addressing the issue of political leadership Burns (1978) first introduced the concepts of transformational and transactional leadership in his book simply titled *Leadership*. In the book Burns describes many ethical aspects to leadership and various dimensions of moral leadership; for example, he notes that “moral leadership emerges from and always returns to, the fundamental wants and needs of followers,” (p. 4) and that “transforming leadership ultimately becomes moral in that it raises the level of human contact and ethical aspiration of both the leader and the led” (p. 20). However, it was not the ethical elements of the book, but its transformational theme that brought Burns’ ideas of transformational and transactional leadership to the forefront.

As Conger & Kanungo (1998) note, to Burns the primary difference between transformational and transactional leadership mainly resides in terms of what leaders and followers offer to one another. Transactional leadership is believed to be “primarily based upon economic or quasi-economic transactions” (Antonakis, Cianciolo, & Sternberg, 2004, p. 173) between leader and follower, and involves contingent reinforcement (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999).

In transactional leadership “followers are motivated by leaders' promises, praises, and rewards or they are corrected by negative feedback, reproof, threats, or disciplinary actions” (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). Bass (1985) notes that the three dimensions of transactional leadership are contingent reward, active management by exception, and passive management by exception.

In general, transactional leadership is regarded as basic management and is considered to be the most common form of leadership; however, the ethical and moral legitimacy of transactional leadership “depends on [leaders] granting the same liberty’s and opportunity’s to others that one claims for oneself, on telling the truth, keeping promises, distributing to each what is due, and employing valid incentives or sanctions” (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999, p. 185). Bass & Steidlmeier (1999) address the moral aspects of transactional leadership by stating that:

Transactional leadership is moral when the truth is told, promises are kept, negotiations are fair and choices are free (Hollander, 1995). It is immoral when [harmful information] is deliberately concealed from associates, when bribes are offered, when nepotism is practiced, and when authority is abused. (p. 192)

Aronson (2001) additionally notes concerning the ethical aspects of transactional leadership:

According to Bird (1999), transactional leadership appears to ethically appropriate under certain conditions. For example, these leaders, in emphasizing day-to-day management rather than leadership, may be instrumental in ensuring that organizations maintain their formal goals and codes of conduct. To the degree that these leaders are seen as acting

fairly, followers will tend to feel respected and treated in a just manner and may exhibit higher levels of effort. (p. 248)

Transformational leaders, on the other hand, are believed to focus on higher order intrinsic needs which results in followers identifying with the needs of the leader. In contrast to transactional leadership, transformational leadership (also sometimes referred to as charismatic and/or visionary leadership (Conger & Kanungo, 1998; House, 1992; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993; Waldman & Yammarino, 1999)) was conceived as leadership which by its very nature involves the moral maturity of leaders (Kuhnert & Lewis, 1987) and the moral uplifting of followers (Burns, 1978). Transformational leadership has been related to the long-standing literature on virtue and moral character, (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999), and is believed to involve what Weber (1947) has called non-economic sources of authority. Such theories attempt to account for follower and subordinate outcomes based upon a sense of purpose and idealized mission. Accordingly, transformational theories of leadership suggest that visionary, charismatic, and/or inspiring leader behaviors induce followers to transcend their own interests for the greater good (Antonakis, Cianciolo, & Sternberg, 2004). Thus, transformational leaders are considered to be defined by four main qualities: charisma or idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass, 1985, 1998; Bass & Avolio, 1993).

Leaders exhibiting transformational, visionary, and/or charismatic leader behaviors are generally regarded as optimistic, committed, determined, risk-taking, and conveying a sense of character and inner direction (House, 1977; House & Aditya, 1997; Shamir, Zakay, Breinin, & Popper, 1998). Thus several theorists have suggested that higher moral development is related to

greater use of transformational leadership behaviors (e.g., Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Kuhnert & Lewis, 1987; Lichtenstein, Smith, & Torbert 1995). Turner, Barling, Epitropaki, Butcher, & Milner (2002) argue that leaders displaying more complex moral reasoning are “more likely to value goals that go beyond immediate self-interest and to foresee the benefits of actions that serve the collective good” (p. 306). As such, transformational leaders are believed to be more confident in their abilities and the moral correctness of their vision (Bass, 1985; Conger & Kanungo, 1998; House & Aditya, 1997), and followers are more likely to have profound trust in the leader’s vision, capabilities, values, and motives.

Authentic transformational and transactional leadership (as opposed to merely pseudo-forms (see Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999)) encourages and promotes values relating to honesty, loyalty, fairness, justice, equality, and human rights. For transactional leadership to be authentic it must be founded on principles of honesty and fairness. For transformational leadership to be authentic, it must incorporate a central core of moral values. Bass & Steidlmeier (1999) provide one example of authenticity in transformational and transactional leadership within the political arena when they state that:

In an election campaign, the authentic transformational leader points to the societal problems he truly believes needs solving. The inauthentic transformational leader points to the same issues but is personally uninterested in doing something about them....The authentic transactional leader makes promises he thinks he can keep, if elected. But he or she may be overly optimistic and unable to keep the promises. An inauthentic transactional leader knows he is making promises he cannot keep, if elected. (p. 191)

Bass (1985) argues that transformational and transactional leadership approaches represent opposite ends of a single continuum. Accordingly, Bass & Steidlmeier (1999) note that, “most leaders have a profile of the full range of leadership that includes both transformational and transactional dimensions” (p. 184). In general it is believed that transformational leadership augments and adds value to the effectiveness of transactional leadership (see Waldman, Bass, & Yammarino, 1990). Thus, considering the ethical expectations and obligations of public leaders to be competent, honest, fair, and lawful while at the same time serving the collective good, abiding by the law, and demonstrating procedural respect, it appears that several elements of both transformational and transactional leadership may be appropriate for maintaining an ethical climate within the public-sector. In what follows, the ethical expectations and values of public leaders and some of the values which are associated with transformational and transactional leadership are collectively examined. The discussion is intended to demonstrate the potential for maintaining an ethical public-sector climate through an integrated approach to leadership in public administration.

## **PUBLIC-SECTOR ETHICS AND LEADERSHIP: THE POTENTIAL FOR INTEGRATION**

As previously noted, the ethical role and responsibility of public officials and the ethical foundations of public administration have been viewed in a variety of ways by several scholars and practitioners. On the left side of Table 1-1 (p. 19) some of the primary ethical obligations and expectations which have been considered fundamental to the role of the public administrator are listed. These include: (a) demonstrating concern for the public good and representing the

interests of society, (b) abiding by appropriate state, federal, and constitutional laws while at the same time having respect for the procedures within the organization, (c) engaging in basic managerial and supervisory responsibilities such as oversight and planning, (d) being honest and truthful in the discharge of official information, (e) acting in reason, fairness, and impartiality in every situation, (f) demonstrating prudence and good judgment in decision-making, (g) providing confidence to citizenry, stakeholders, and subordinates in the abilities of the official to perform the required duties, and demonstrating intelligence and aptitude in the assigned or elected position, and (h) also providing subordinates with the adequate direction and motivational encouragement needed to perform their responsibilities.

Considering these ethical expectations, when viewed from the perspective of transformational and transactional theories of leadership several of the qualities commonly associated with these theories appear to relate to the ethical role and responsibility of the public administrator. Thus, Table 1-1 also shows aspects of transformational and transactional leadership which can be considered relevant to the public-sector leader. As displayed, neither transformational nor transactional leadership alone can fully capture the ethical responsibility associated with the role of the public administrator; therefore, the most effective ethical leader within public-sector organizations will incorporate both transactional and transformational factors. For example, the transformational leader is more likely to value goals that go beyond immediate self-interest and serves the collective good. Thus, the expectation of an ethical administrator to demonstrate concern for the public good can be associated with transformational leadership. As such, the public-sector leader that relates the ethical obligations of his/her administrative role to an integrated approach to leadership will likely focus on values which best serve the interests of society. Also, the expectation of public officials to obey the law and to

respect the procedures instituted within the organization can be related to the managerial aspects of transactional leadership. In management it is expected that rules will be followed, procedures will be upheld, and policies will be enforced. As such, the ethical public-sector leader focusing on an integrated leadership approach is likely to enforce and maintain regulatory order through contingent reinforcement, while also providing subordinates with appropriate training and education of all relevant laws and policies relating to their position.

In addition, it is believed that both transformational and transactional leaders value qualities which relate to honesty, truthfulness, and fairness. Similarly, these values are expected of public-sector leaders. Thus, the public-sector leader approaching the subject of ethics through an integrated approach to leadership is likely to value honesty and integrity, and act with impartiality in the exercise of authority while also demonstrating prudence in decision-making. Moreover, transformational leaders are also believed to be motivating and inspiring. By its very nature, transformational leadership is believed to involve the moral uplifting of followers and the moral maturity of leaders. Accordingly, the ethical expectation of public-sector leaders to treat colleagues and subordinates with respect and fairness, and to once again exercise discretion and good-judgment, can all be associated with the transformational values of demonstrating prudence in decision-making and providing motivational encouragement to followers.

Bearing in mind these associations between the ethical obligations of public officials and transformational and transactional leadership values, it can be argued that the ethical role of the public-sector leader is more fully understood when explored within the context of an integrated approach to leadership (where ethical considerations are incorporated into a framework of transactional and transformational leadership). Although it is highly doubtful that the implementation of any particular leadership style will automatically contribute to the enactment

and/or maintenance of ethical behaviors within the sector, an integrated approach can be a means of gradually enhancing, maintaining, and better understanding the ethical climates within public-sector environments, where: (a) the moral foundations of administrative ethics have been described in terms of citizenship and the collective good, (b) the ethical role of the public administrator has been related to honor, trust, lawfulness, and competence, and (c) decisions are believed to be made based to be made based upon discretion, the public interest, and societal expectations.

Granted, every quality associated with transactional and transformational leadership may not easily serve the needs of the ethical public-sector leader. For example, risk-taking and commitment are elements of transformational leadership; however, Dobell (1989) argues that there are systemic reasons as to why public-sector leaders tend to avoid risk and sustain the status quo, and also that the attempts by public officials to satisfy various groups may be perceived as a lack of commitment and inconsistency. Nonetheless, other qualities such as honesty, optimism, fairness, inner direction, and the motivation of followers can add to the ethical climate of public-sector organizations. Thus, a public-sector leader who focuses on specific aspects of both transformational and transactional leadership can potentially find the approaches beneficial in maintaining and better understanding his/her own ethical leadership values, and eventually in building an ethical climate within public-sector environments.

However, it should be noted that the ethical expectations of public-sector leaders will quite possibly relate to a variety of factors associated with both transformational and transactional leadership. As such, any associations between ethical values within the public sector and transformational and transactional leadership must take into account the potential for overlap between the relationships. For example, the expectation of public officials to exercise

discretion can in some ways be associated with the transformational values of providing motivational encouragement, and also being inspirational and confident. In theory there will likely always be the possibility that the ethical expectations and obligations of public officials will relate in some form to both transformational and transactional leadership. Accordingly the categorization of the ethical values into transformational and transactional columns does not represent distinct or conclusive placements, but is meant to merely provide a broad conceptualization of the relationships that potentially exist between ethical values, expectations, and obligations of public officials, and factors associated with transformational and transactional leadership.

Nonetheless these associations are meaningful in that they provide insight as to how ethical considerations can be incorporated into a framework of integrated public-sector leadership. As Pawar & Eastman (1997) suggest, the challenges of public leaders to be more adaptive may create an opportunity and a need for charismatic leadership, and as Van Wart (2003) notes concerning leadership within the sector, “there is a striking need for a comprehensive leadership model that integrates transactional and transformational elements” (p. 225). Thus, the current expectations of public leaders to be more ethically and morally responsible may contribute to an environment where an integrated public-sector leadership approach is welcomed.

**Table 1-1**

**Specific Ethical Expectations and Obligations of Public Sector Leaders Relating to Aspects of Transformational and Transactional Theories of Leadership**

Ethical expectations and obligations of public leaders	Leadership values associated with ethical public sector expectations and obligations	
	Transformational leadership	Transactional leadership
Concern for the public good	x	
Law abiding		x
Demonstrating procedural respect		x
Basic managerial considerations		x
Providing honesty and truthfulness ( <i>in the discharge of official information</i> )	x	x
Acting in fairness when exercising authority	x	x
Demonstrating prudence in decision-making	x	x
Providing inspiration and confidence to citizenry, stakeholders, and subordinates in ability to handle official responsibilities ( <i>positional aptitude</i> )	x	
Providing motivational encouragement and direction to subordinates		x

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