

Congressional City Conference



The Ethical Leader: Rules and Tools

March 12, 2017

Washington, DC

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Agenda

So What is Ethics?

Sample Ethical Principles

Making Ethical Decisions

Concluding Thoughts on Ethical Leadership



So What is Ethics?

Ethics is Not . . .

Abstract and irrelevant to real-world practice

Just a matter of personal preference

About what is best for me

Ethics is Not . . .

Simply following the ethics laws.

- There are actions that are lawful but not ethical
- There are actions that are ethical that may violate the law
 - Some actions, if not for the law, would be perfectly acceptable ethically
 - Some actions may be ethically required but are illegal



So . . . What is Ethics?

“moral principles for living and making decisions.”

- Larry Z. Leslie (2004) *Mass Communication Ethics: Decision making in postmodern culture, 2nd edition*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 6.

“the study of what we ought to do.”

- A. David Gordon and John Michael Kittross (1999) *Controversies in Media Ethics, 2nd edition*. New York: Longman, 1.

The Foundation: Values

That is . . .

- Whatever it is that we value
- And that is relevant/important to consider

‘Moral values’

- Broadly defined

The Values of a Public Servant

Not only what we ourselves value personally

Values associated with our role

- The values of our constituents/community
- Institutional values
- Collective goods for which we bear special responsibility

The Necessity of Inconsistency

Public servants need to adopt codes of ethical conduct that reflect their *roles*, not just their *personal values*

In this sense, *consistency* between one's public and one's private conduct *may not be a virtue*



Discussion

The Role of the Facts on the Ground

Guide us in determining which of our values should be considered

Determine the decision(s) that must be made

Guide us in evaluating the merits of various options

The Role of the Facts on the Ground

DO NOT determine whether something is or is not valued

DO NOT change the rules

Ethical Principles

Guides to deciding what to do, given our values and the facts on the ground

Methods of applying our values to the facts



Sample Ethical Principles

Character/Virtue

Do that which avoids both the extremes of too much and too little.

The “Golden Mean” (Aristotle)

Character/Virtue

**Do that which you can justify and for which
you are willing to take complete responsibility.**

Existentialist (Jean-Paul Sartre)

Ethic of Care

A commitment “to flourishing and growth of individuals, . . . [while] acknowledg[ing] our interconnectedness and interdependence.”

(Maurice Hammington)

“more a characterization of a social relation than the description of an individual disposition.”

(Virginia Held)

Duty

Do that which you would want every person to do, as if required by law.

The “Categorical Imperative” (Immanuel Kant)

Duty

**Do unto others what you would have them
do unto you.**

The “Golden Rule” (Jesus of Nazareth)

Consequentialist

**The greatest good for the greatest number,
while doing the least harm possible**

Utilitarianism (John Stuart Mill)

Consequentialist

Imagine that you do not know anything about who you are in the society in which the results of your decision are to be experienced. What decision would you choose?

‘Veil of Ignorance’ (John Rawls)

Contrasts

Character

Duty

Care

Consequence

Reason and Intuition

Some ethicists insist that ethics is all ‘in our heads’

- We must set aside everything except rational thought

Some ethicists insist that an important element of ethics is in our hearts

- Call it conscience, or intuition, or inspiration, or discernment
- Something that is not strictly ‘irrational’, but more accurately nonrational



Questions?



Making Ethical Decisions

Ethical Dilemma

A difficult choice between two or more alternatives, each of which can be defended plausibly in ethical terms

Struggling with doing the right thing, when the right thing is obvious, is *not* an ethical dilemma

- It is a character test

Case #1 – The Parking Ticket

Fact Summary:

- You have parked illegally
- No 'harm' has resulted
- A ticket is being written as you approach
- When the officer recognizes you, he/she starts to put the ticket book away.



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The Ethical Question: ???

Decision: ???

Rationale: ???

Case #2 – Help from an Old Friend

Fact Summary:

- You have an old, wealthy and powerful friend in town
- Your adult child is looking for that first career job
- Your friend personally offers him/her a job



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Case #3 - Renewal

Fact Summary:

- A well-funded, well-respected developer proposes a major revitalization project for a blighted area
- In order to implement the project, the city will need to exercise its power of eminent domain
- The residents of the area are unified in their opposition to the project and the threat of the loss of their properties

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Concluding Thoughts on Ethical Leadership

Ethical Decision Making Involves . . .

Applying relevant values

To the facts of a situation

By means of one or more tested ethical principles

Being an Ethical Public Leader . . .

Requires us to consider values unique to our role

Requires us to be able to explain our actions so that others can at least understand, if not agree with, our actions

- And see them as the legitimate acts of a public servant

On Being an Ethical Public Leader

Being ethical can be costly

- Emotionally
- Interpersonally
- Socially
- Economically
- Politically

Of course, being unethical
can be costly, too!

On Being an Ethical Public Leader

Your office brings with it unique ethical obligations

Your office also brings with it a higher degree of visibility and public interest in your activities

- Which is a form of **power** that you have received

On Being an Ethical Public Leader

**Use the power you have to change the way others
see government, politics . . .**

**. . . and what it means to conduct oneself with real
honor and integrity**

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