

Course Learning Outcomes for Unit V

Upon completion of this unit, students should be able to:

5. Analyze public administration ethics based on ontological and epistemological theory.
 - 5.1 Use information or technology resources to research domestic or international current events and investigate ethical practices.
 - 5.2 Identify and explain the personal aspect of ethics in an organizational setting, which supports effective decision-making in a leadership capacity.

Reading Assignment

Chapter 5:

Conflicts of Responsibility: The Ethical Dilemma

Unit Lesson

Representing the Public: How to Meet Ethical Obligations

What motivates public administrators? Martinez (2009) asks this question in the context of the public administrator's primary function – it is not profit? Unlike the private sector, public organizations are true to the “cause of the agency” (p. 78). Deciding how to act ethically in every situation is a constant challenge for any leader working for a public agency. One can argue that regardless of complex or new situations, public leaders have an obligation to act responsibly for the purposes of self-respect, the mission of the organization, and the challenge - owing constituents or outside stakeholders the assurance of public trust.

When ethical decisions or stances are required, Svava (2007) describes a problem-solving model using three categories of review: description, analysis, and decision.

1. Description
 - a. Clarify the facts of the situation.
 - b. Asses the interests of all parties who have stakes in the outcome of the situation and how they are potentially affected; stakeholder analysis.
2. Analysis
 - a. Determine your duty in this situation considering the obligations and responsibilities of your position and your professional role.
 - i. Consider one's position and place in the organizational structure and what one is expected to do by the organization.
 - ii. Consider any professional obligations that are distinct from what the organization expects; specific standards for one's profession and general obligations, including advancing the public interest and promoting the democratic process.
 - b. Analyze the situation according to each ethical approach.
 - i. Virtue based: What would a good person do in this situation?
 - ii. Principle based: What principles apply to the situation?
 - iii. Results oriented: How does one promote the best consequences?
 - c. List options.
3. Decision
 - a. Choose the best alternative.
 - b. Provide a reasoned justification for the decision.
 - c. Monitor and evaluate results. Make adjustments if necessary.

Options are reviewed from different perspective in the "Description" stage. Based upon the position of the organization, the public administrator must determine the important variables to consider that pertain to character, the actions derived from the outcomes, and what the least amount of damages or consequences would evolve if certain decisions are made. The outcomes from these questions can be developed into a set of options. During "Analysis," alternative perspectives are designed. An important variable to consider is that limited sets of alternatives are not established, as some that may "ignore an important ethical perspective" (p. 109). After all three perspectives are reviewed, it will be much easier to justify—make a decision on—the basis of the least damaging and most productive.

Inspector General and Auditors

Public administrators must also be knowledgeable that protections exist to abbreviate or stop dissemination of information when confidentiality is tied to public safety. The public has the "right to know" – but only to a certain limit. Agencies such as the Inspector General (IG) and the Government Accountability Office (GAO) are independent agencies that represent external inspections on the operations of public offices. Duties of these agencies provide accountability, auditing, and financial analysis inspections. Some results are of public record, other results are not - protected by laws of confidentiality.

The unit assignment requires you to recall a relatively current event and identify that a certain framework of validation of ethics is followed (or not) during the course of ethical decision-making.

The Institute of Public Administration of Canada treats the issue of confidentiality very straightforward when they state, "The public servant is committed to ensuring that sensitive information is treated with discretion and responsibility in order to protect the privacy and security of the public and the efficiency of government" (The Institute of Public Administration of Canada, 2005).

In the book, *Ethics in Public Administration: A Philosophical Approach*, the author points out, "By the very nature of their work, public administrators frequently must grapple with the ethics of keeping secrets and preserving confidentiality, while at the same time being mindful of their truthfulness to society. Therefore, it is important to examine secrets and to focus on the philosophical underpinnings that provide a rationale for maintaining confidentiality" (Sheeran, p. 108).

For the purposes of this conversation, the author has defined a secret as a "Truth known to a person who has the right or duty not to reveal it to another person," especially if by revealing that truth could bring physical or mental harm to the person or another person, group, or community (Sheeran, p. 108).

References

- Martinez, J. M. (2009). *Public administration ethics for the 21st century*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger.
- Sheeran, P. J. (1993). *Ethics in public administration: a philosophical approach*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Svara, J. (2007). *The ethics primer for public administrators in government and nonprofit organizations*. Boston, MA: Jones and Bartlett.
- The Institute of Public Administration of Canada. (2005). *A public servant's commitments*. Retrieved at <http://www.ipac.ca/publicsectorethics>