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Ethics and Public Administration

PETER JAMES GROEN

Veterans Administration

Ethics and Public Administration?

Is ethics a subject that should be addressed by the interdiscipline of public administration? The answer must be in the affirmative. The most immediate support for this claim lies in consistent reports of misconduct by public officials. The reports of illegal, unethical conduct apply to officials at the federal, state, and local levels of government. These reports are no longer exceptional occurrences. The public's confidence in the honesty and integrity of public officials has reached a level that demands our attention. Some specific studies and surveys referred to are: *The Image of the Federal Service* by Kilpatrick, Cummings, and Jennings; "Watergate and the Image of the Federal Service Revisited" by Dr. R. D. Lee, Jr.; and a survey by Harris and Associates, Inc. conducted in late 1973 for the Senate Subcommittee on Intergovernmental relations. These reports seem to stress that there is a need for a greater attention to ethics by all concerned within the field of public administration. These and other studies show that there is a long term, deeply held negative attitude by the public toward the government and public officials. The consequences of failure to take note and introduce a program to combat this trend demands reflection.

A review of the literature on "Ethics and Public Administration" shows that little attention has been paid to the topic. While recent issues of the *Public Administration Review* have tended to have more articles related to this subject than ever before, history has shown that this is not a topic that has been adequately addressed by public administrators. L. M. Kohlmeier, Jr. in *The Regulators* sums up the general attitude. He reports that in the late 1950's and 1960's there was no major regulatory agency where real or alleged scandal was not involved. Yet no major reforms were expected nor did they occur. Codes of Ethics were dusted off and then forgotten. It will be unfortunate if that continues to be the normal response of public administrators towards instances of scandalous conduct by fellow members of the profession.

Ethics and The Study of Public Administration

The subject of ethics has not been adequately addressed by universities with programs in Public Administration. The problem of ethics, or the lack

of ethics, in public administration has usually been avoided, dismissed as irrelevant or too controversial, or it has been relegated to a position of in-consequence within the *major* courses of study in Public Administration. The handbook entitled *NASPAA 1974, Graduate School Programs in Public Administration and Public Affairs* shows that no graduate program in public administration in America required course work in ethics for its students. Contrast this with what has taken place in the Business Administration programs offered in American universities. Dr. T. F. MacMahon, of the Loyola Business School, in a study of "Socio-Ethical Education in Business Schools" reports that more than half (56%) of the business schools responding to his survey declared that their schools offered a socio-ethical course. In 60 percent of these, it was required for graduation. Andrew Mann in "The Ethics Puzzle" states that concerns related to the issue of ethics have led many Business Administration programs to offer or require socio-ethical courses. Fortunately, in the author's post-graduate experience, it has been noted that several of the Public Administration programs offered at major universities have, or intend to introduce, ethics courses.

Ethics and Public Administration Tools

The study of "ethics in public administration" is a wide open field. This applies not only to the area of theorizing, but in the practical application and use of tools that have already been developed for use by public administrators.

The Ethical Aptitude Test developed by the Institute of Situational Ethics in Washington, D.C., Kohlberg's Moral Judgement Scale, Reiss' Moral Acceptability Scale, the use of lie detector equipment, and a host of other tools have been developed and are now available for use by managers. *Who, What, Where, When and How* are administrators using these tools? Many companies in the private sector now make use of one or more of these tools when recruiting people for their organization. However, this field is still in its infancy and the tools are being used haphazardly. It is to be hoped that use of these tools will be carefully analyzed to ensure they are properly applied. It should be determined whether these are valid and reliable tools. Public administrators may find themselves utilizing these tools in the near future.

Public Administration and Ethics!

Ethics, in any setting, is a hard topic to address. To attempt to develop a tool, a program, or a practical application of ethics to public administra-

tion is a harrowing experience. Any attempt to reach specific conclusions and make recommendations which might assist public administrators in recruiting and training ethical managers, making ethical decisions, or recognizing competing ethics and values in political struggles over the budget or government policies will be frustrated. One is always aware that the attempt to derive these conclusions and recommendations is itself born out of acknowledged and unseen moral values and theories. Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine, Kant, Mills, and hundreds more have tackled the subject of ethics. The conclusion, that ethics is one of the hardest topics a public administrator could hope to address, becomes very evident.

Ethics and Public Administration: Recommendations

The recommendations that follow represent a stab at the issue of "ethics and public administration" by the author. The recommendations and conclusions were reached after extensive research and thought on the subject.

First, it must be clearly recognized that the issue of ethics in public administration is important. To rid the negative attitude the public holds toward government and public officials, a comprehensive approach to this problem must be taken. Improved recruiting and training methods should be used for civil service career personnel to ensure that officials have had training or education in ethics. Perhaps specific tests on personality and values (i.e. Kohlberg's Moral Judgement Scale, Adam's Personal Audit, Reiss' Moral Acceptability Scale, Ethical Aptitude Test) might be employed to test for those qualities that would lead to better employees. An effort should be made to increase publicity and dissemination of information regarding ethics legislation to civil service employees and to the public. An agency which would specifically function as an enforcement body to monitor government activities and bring suit, penalize, or dismiss government officials who do not adhere to legislated standards, should be established. This would be similar to the ombudsman office already used by a number of countries and organizations. Public administrators should be encouraged or required to study court decisions and opinions on Constitutional law. These court decisions reflect an historical development and definition of values and ethical standards in America. Also, legislative action to define and forbid certain types of unacceptable conduct such as bribery, extortion, and conflict of interest, should continue. A survey of the public's attitude towards government officials should be taken regularly to determine the success of these efforts to improve the image of government.

Second, there should be an increased attention in public administration to the issue of ethics in professional journals. Since the topic has not been adequately addressed to date, there is fertile grounds for debate. Hopefully, public discourse will lead to constructive suggestions on this topic. At worst, the very fact that the issue would be placed under debate would indicate an ongoing, healthy concern by the profession about the ethical conduct of managers.

Third, universities with programs in Public Administration should add ethics courses to their curriculums. Whether they would be required course work would be left to the university's discretion. A possible measure of the success of this recommendation lies in the student response to the offering. As has been indicated previously, some universities are already implementing this idea.

Fourth, more extensive analysis and research into the tools planned and currently available to public administrators to deal with the issue of ethics in management must be carried out. The validity and reliability of the many personality tests, ethics tests, and lie detector tests currently used in the name of improving the ethical quality or standards of employees must be studied further. The use of these tests coupled with research evaluation and analysis techniques should be subject to review. Before the widespread use of these tools occurs they should be adequately tested to ensure these tools would be at least as reliable as currently employed mechanisms such as intelligence quotient tests.

Fifth, ethics, in any setting, is a hard topic to address. Debates over moral theories has been and will continue to take place throughout time with the likelihood that no absolute standard or even a consensus on a standard for right moral behavior will emerge. The very fact that the debate should rage is a healthy sign. But participants and on-lookers alike should not be discouraged if no concrete standards or proposals are made and accepted. It should be recognized that, in this instance, if the means (debate) becomes the end, perhaps that will satisfy.