

Introduction— and a Pop Quiz

This text is a primer on *administrative ethics*, a term that refers to the ethics of persons who occupy career leadership and staff positions in government and nonprofit organizations. It brings to mind oxymorons, which are a form of satiric humor. “Military intelligence,” “jumbo shrimp,” and “airline food” are popular examples. To be honest, “administrative ethics” is probably pretty high on the list of commonly used oxymorons, but more to the point at the start of this text is the possibility that “ethics primer” itself connects two elements that are incompatible. To cover a complex topic such as ethics in the public service in a small, introductory book may seem to be an impossible task. Is it sufficient to briefly introduce and provide initial instruction—the dictionary meaning of a primer—for a subject as weighty as administrative ethics?

Based on my experience in teaching administrative ethics in a short-course format and as a component in a broader course for many years, there is an important precondition. What makes it possible to introduce this vast topic in a meaningful way is the fact that the reader already knows a great deal about ethics. I am assuming that the reader is an adult—young or otherwise—who is either interested in entering the public service or already works for a government or nonprofit organization. As we shall see, both relative maturity and self-selection for a public service position are important to one’s knowledge of and attitudes about administrative ethics.

Ethics is fundamental to one’s work in public service. This does not mean that it is simple or should be treated in a simplistic way. Still, if the topic cannot be discussed in a concise and straightforward way, ethics will be irrelevant to many

of the people who work in public service. There are challenging standards and values that should be upheld, and these may be understood in broad terms as well as being the subject for specialized study. This text does not start the process of finding ethics, but it does provide an introduction to examining the nature of standards to which public administrators should adhere in order to meet their far-reaching responsibilities and challenges. Stated differently, this primer is not intended to give the reader a little bit of ethics that might be expanded by additional study. The intention is to provide a lot of ethics with an introduction to their origins and meaning that can be expanded with additional study as well as with reflection based on growing experience.

The tone of this text is personal, the style is a dialogue, and the purpose is exhortatory. The first and second person will be used extensively. “I” will direct comments to “you.” It is not possible to create the interaction of the classroom, but an effort will be made to encourage an exchange in which your response in the form of answers to questions that I pose will help to carry forward the dialogue. Finally, I believe that knowledge provides the basis for understanding and action, and the discussion in this text will provide extensive information. The underlying intent, however, is not pedagogical; that is to say, to teach you the subject of administrative ethics. The purpose is to exhort you to engage yourself in ethics, to be more aware of the ethical dimension of public service, to be ethical in a more thoughtful and thoroughgoing way than before, and to do more to encourage others to be ethical.

Implicit in this intent is an approach to ethics that stresses both reducing unethical behavior and promoting the exercise of positive ethical responsibilities. Too often discussions of ethics in the public sector focus on unethical practices and ways to avoid or prevent bad behavior. These important topics are addressed, but more attention is given in this discussion to actions that administrators should take. Harm comes from inaction—the failure to do what is right to meet the highest standards—as well as from engaging in clearly unethical actions. It is important to recognize that doing what is right can raise complex issues and require courage.

Thus, the purpose of the text is to promote ethical behavior by public administrators on both individual and organizational levels. Specifically, the text enables the reader to do the following:

1. Appreciate that ethics is integral to the nature of democratic public administration
2. Understand the responsibilities of public administrators and the bases of administrative ethics

3. Understand the tenets of the codes of ethics for various professional organizations in the public sector and how they are applied
4. Be aware of and avoid the pressures and forces in public administration that can contribute to unethical behavior
5. Develop the knowledge and skills needed to deal with ethical problems that arise in public service
6. Strengthen the ethical climate in organizations

All of these serve to support ethical action.

It is obvious that this text will cover a great deal of intellectual territory. The discussion of topics is limited to the presentation of the material that is relevant to the line of argument that I am developing. Necessarily, this approach leaves the reader without the full exposition of a topic that it would receive if it were being considered on its own. Readers may pursue topics in more depth by following the guide to the literature provided in the endnotes. I seek to offer a serious but accessible conversation about ethics in the text, and a more scholarly examination of ethics in the endnotes.

POP QUIZ: DO YOU HAVE A CODE OF ETHICS?

I do not expect that you will already have a well-formed, explicit code of ethics that you follow in your administrative work. Before examining the subject matter of this text in more depth, however, it is useful to establish a baseline. Here are some questions you can answer for yourself before proceeding further in the text:

What is or should be your code of ethics for work in government or nonprofit organizations?

What are the standards of right and wrong that should guide your work—the “do’s and don’ts” of public service?

If you will take the time now to record your thoughts, we will refer back to what you have written and compare your responses to other professional students in public administration.

UNDERSTANDING THE SETTING FOR ADMINISTRATIVE ETHICS

The discussion of “administrative” ethics applies both to those who work in government and in nonprofit organizations. Our appreciation of “new governance”

includes the recognition that public needs are addressed by organizations in both the public and nonprofit sectors (Kettl 2002). Why is ethics a special concern in these particular organizations? It is important that administrators operate within legal and organizational controls. They serve the public, but not as private professionals who operate on a fee-for-service basis. Although there are important differences between the two sectors, the similarities are even greater and staff members in each can benefit from knowing more about the ethical challenges of the other.

To simplify the discussion throughout the text, four terms will be used generically to describe both the governmental and nonprofit setting: organizations, administrators, political superiors, and citizens or clients.

Organizations refer to governmental entities such as a city government as well as to nonprofit organizations. Depending on the context and the nature of the organization, the term will encompass the specific unit to which one is assigned; for instance, a section, the whole department, or the entire organization. For example, a municipal police officer will deal with some ethical issues in his or her area of assignment, such as the patrol division, with some in the department as a whole and with others as an employee of city government. For a staff member in a small nonprofit agency, the distinctions may not be useful or necessary, but larger nonprofits will have similar divisions.

Administrators refer to the civil service or career staff in government and the professional staff in nonprofit organizations. These positions range from the top executives (city managers in municipal government or executive directors in nonprofit organizations) to the staff members who handle a variety of specialized tasks. Some will have supervisory responsibilities and, therefore, are the administrative superiors of the staff they supervise. Others work without subordinates; for example, analysts and many frontline service providers including teachers, counselors, eligibility specialists, or police officers.

Political superiors, on the other hand, refer to persons who set the official goals and policies for the organization and oversee the administrators. In government organizations, this category includes both elected executives and members of legislative bodies as well as the politically appointed and politically oriented top layer of officials chosen by political executives such as the president, governor, or “strong” mayor. In local governments and special purpose agencies such as school districts, the political superiors hold positions such as council member, board member, or commissioner. In nonprofit organizations, these persons sit on the board of directors.

Finally, the words *citizens* and *clients* refer to persons served by governmental and nonprofit organizations. In some respects, this is the least satisfactory of

the generic terms. When stressing the recipients of a service, the word *client* is generally a suitable term for both government and nonprofit organizations, but it works less well for persons who are audited by an IRS agent or given a speeding ticket by a police officer. Those who do not choose their treatment may not feel that they are a “client” or are being “served,” but we will still include them in this category. *Citizen* implies not just the person who is impacted by organizational action, but also the person who provides the support and legitimacy for government (Denhardt and Denhardt 2011). Citizenship has come to be intermixed with the discussion of immigrant status, and to some it is a legal term reserved for those who are native-born or naturalized in the United States (Lucio 2009). We will consider citizens to include all residents who are members of the community that interact with government. How officials in governmental and nonprofit organizations interact with residents who are not documented is an important ethical issue.

The term *citizen* does not have the same meaning for the nonprofit organizations whose leaders are not chosen by or directly accountable to the public. Still, nonprofit organizations also have broad responsibilities to persons beyond those who receive services or provide contributions. If a nonprofit organization is perceived by the public to be wasteful and ineffective, it will probably not be able to survive just because it keeps a small group of clients happy. Furthermore, nonprofits operate within a legal framework that is sanctioned by government and the people. Thus, the basic idea of a service and fiduciary relationship between the organization and the people or some segment of it is common to the public and the nonprofit sectors.

These terms suggest the four responsibilities that are shared by government and nonprofit administrators. These responsibilities are the foundation for identifying the nature of the duty of public administrators: their responsibility to serve individuals, their responsibility to be accountable to the “people” and promote the public interest, their responsibility to their organization, and their responsibility to political superiors and to uphold the law and established policy. Some administrators in governmental and certain nonprofit organizations have the authority to exercise coercive power to support the discharge of their assigned responsibilities.¹ Others in government and nonprofit organizations invite persons in need to accept services or assistance; they don’t coerce them to do any-

¹ For example, a nonprofit organization that provides training in a welfare-to-work program will determine whether a client meets prescribed criteria that permit the person to continue receiving benefits.

thing. Frequently, it is citizens who initiate the contact to request or demand actions, remedies, or attention. In any of these circumstances, public administrators relate with citizens in a distinctive way. This is not a market-exchange relationship in which a service or commodity is offered, and customers can decide whether the price and quality are acceptable. In some interactions between citizens and officials, citizens are dependent and vulnerable and have no other source for the service. In other interactions, citizens are the “bosses” of officials. The citizens or clients who interact with public administrators have reason to expect that they will be treated fairly and with respect, that they will be informed and listened to, and that they will receive the service or benefit that they deserve.

The responsibility to the people—to serve the public interest—means that administrators should also go beyond one-on-one encounters with individuals to consider general concerns of groups of people or society as a whole. Promoting the public interest requires attention not only to current citizens but to future generations as well (Frederickson 1997). Public administrators’ awareness of social needs and changing conditions provides the basis for identifying possible changes in procedure or policy that they may initiate or propose to administrative or political superiors. They also have a broad responsibility to make good use of the resources that have been entrusted to them whether they come from taxes or contributions.

Public administrators should also be responsible to the organization of which they are a part. This does not mean that the administrator is totally bound by the organization or loses his or her own voice in discussions of ends and means. Still, public administrators are not sole practitioners like physicians or accountants who can set up their own practice. They operate within an authority structure, they work with others to advance organizational mission, and they have a responsibility to make the organization as strong, effective, and ethical as possible.

Administrators also have a responsibility to their political superiors. This relationship involves a complex mixture of control and freedom, accountability and independence. Political-administrative relations based on shared responsibilities are essential to the duty of the public servant.

THE SETTING CONTINUED: DIFFERENCES BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AND NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

There are basic similarities in the positions of administrators who work in government and in nonprofit organizations. Still, it is important to recognize

some significant differences between these types of organizations as well.² Nonprofit service organizations arise from a concern about an unmet need. Ott and Dicke (2012, 3) describe their origins in this way:

Throughout the history of the United States, individual citizens repeatedly have recognized a need or a problem, attracted others who share their concern, and built a voluntary constituency that was committed to ameliorating, solving, or eliminating it, even if the issue and the people associated with it were socially undesirable at the time. In instance after instance over the decades and centuries, this voluntary process has been used to influence changes in public policy and government support—or tolerance—for what was originally an unacceptable cause, case or issue, whether it be unacceptable politically, socially, or religiously.

Nonprofits have freedom and flexibility not available to governmental organizations. This freedom applies to generating resources, but nonprofits lack the relatively certain revenues of government and the coercive power to enforce the collection of taxes. Nonprofits have a basic mission that is central to the work of the organization, and it is usually much narrower in scope than the typical general-purpose government. Nonprofits are sometimes referred to as *mission-driven organizations*. In a sense, the mission has an overriding impact on all those who work for a nonprofit, and this condition differentiates it from government. Consider this comparison. City council members are elected to determine the mission and goals of their city government; the choices the members make may be hotly debated within the council and in the larger community, and the specific goals may change dramatically over time. On the other hand, the persons who work in a nonprofit as board members or as staff members typically begin with a commitment to the organization's mission. They are expected to allow the mission to "drive" them, although they make the detailed decisions about how to translate the mission into reality at a given time. If some persons want to pursue

² The scope of nonprofit organizations is large and they vary considerably in their degree of formality. This text is written for administrators in nonprofits as opposed to board members, and I assume that they work for tax exempt 501(c)(3) organizations as defined by the Internal Revenue Service. The purposes for which these organizations are created are "charitable, religious, educational, scientific, literary, testing for public safety, fostering national or international amateur sports competition, and preventing cruelty to children or animals." The meaning of *charitable* includes the following activities: "relief of the poor, the distressed, or the underprivileged; advancement of religion; advancement of education or science; erecting or maintaining public buildings, monuments, or works; lessening the burdens of government; lessening neighborhood tensions; eliminating prejudice and discrimination; defending human and civil rights secured by law; and combating community deterioration and juvenile delinquency" (Internal Revenue Service 2012).

the mission differently or pursue a different version of the mission, they may choose to leave and even to start their own organization.

This option points to another basic characteristic that makes nonprofits distinctive: nonprofit organizations are competitive service organizations. They do not have a monopoly on the provision of a service, as is sometimes the case of government agencies. In addition, they do not provide a product through the market, as is the case of businesses. Still, they offer a purpose, a service, or a product that benefits society (like government) in a competitive setting (like business). To succeed, they must attract clients, volunteers, supporters, and contributors in the face of other organizations that are trying to have the same success. Thus, the staff members in nonprofit organizations are public servants who operate in a more open, flexible, and competitive environment. The underlying presumption of this text is that the shared commitment to serve (as well as the absence of profit motive) makes the staff in nonprofit and governmental organizations more alike than different.

OVERVIEW

What can this text do—and not do? It most certainly cannot “teach ethics” by specifying what is the “correct” way to behave. Furthermore, it does not “teach ethics” in the sense of introducing the reader to a previously unknown subject or by treating the reader as an ethical blank slate. You come to this text and an interest in administrative ethics with a reservoir of ethical and moral values on which you can draw. Hopefully you recorded some of those values earlier when you completed the pop quiz about your code of ethics. Rather, I write this text with the intention of helping you to understand the integral role of ethics in public administration, organize your thinking about ethics, understand the sources of ethical thinking and linkages between your personal values and the ethical values of public service, and heighten your awareness of the ethical content of work in the public sector.

If the grasp of basic ethical concepts and standards is widespread, awareness of the full range of ethical standards that apply to public administrators is less well developed. Furthermore, sophisticated and reflective ethical reasoning and the knowledge, commitment, and determination to be an autonomous ethical actor are often lacking. The text seeks to encourage you to attain this level of ethical reasoning and to enable you to do so. It seeks to arm you with the resources to recognize ethical problems that require your attention and to assert your ethical values even if others may pressure you to act unethically by commission or omission, that is, the failure to act. Finally, the text encourages you to not only

steer clear of unethical behavior and helps you to avoid ethical pitfalls but also to embrace the importance of discharging positive ethical responsibilities—doing good as well as not doing bad.

The effort starts in the next chapter where we consider the nature of ethical ideas and from where they come. We also examine more fully the various levels of ethical reasoning and help you understand where you are compared with a range of possibilities. Throughout the text, a touchstone of administrative ethics is public duty. In the chapter on refining a sense of duty, we seek to show duty as more active rather than reactive. One view of duty defines serving the public in terms of observing the law and obeying superiors. A refined sense of duty is based on careful reflection about the nature of responsibilities to the public, political superiors, and the organization. It also requires that you develop a reasoned view about your obligations and the constraints under which you operate as an individual engaged in public service. This refined sense of obligation supports postconventional ethical reasoning. The chapter on reinforcing and enlarging duty will broaden the discussion to examine the philosophical perspectives on virtues, principles, and consequences that contribute to universal standards of ethical behavior. This chapter also presents a complete model that incorporates the expanded sense of duty and philosophical perspectives, complementing the examination of the basic elements of a model of administrative ethics presented in the chapter on the ideas, sources, and development of administrative ethics. The “ethics triangle” provides guidance based on the ethical ideals of public interest, justice, character, and the greatest good. The model will be used as a framework for examining codes of ethics for professionals in government and nonprofits in the chapter on codifying duty and ethics.

Later chapters will consider ethical challenges and actions. The chapter on undermining duty identifies the extensive factors that can undermine ethics. The chapter on deciding how to meet obligations explores complex ethical problems and presents a guide to problem solving in these situations. The special considerations and complexities of a particular kind of ethical problem—whistleblowing—are presented in the chapter on acting on duty in the face of uncertainty. The distinction between internal complaints and going outside is examined along with the choice between public and anonymous whistleblowing. The chapters on elevating ethical and mandating duty explore ways to promote ethics through the actions of managers and supervisors within organizations and through external mandates, particularly ethics laws. The concluding chapter, on the duties of public administrators, summarizes the obligations and responsibilities of public administrators who are committed to a principled, virtuous, and utilitarian sense of public duty.

