

The Role of Ethics in the 21st Century: A Call for Values-Based Leadership

By Merlin Switzer

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The headline in the July 26, 2008, *Sacramento Bee* proclaimed: "City's salvage scandal spreads." This was one in a series of articles about a scrap-metal dealer who had admitted to bribing employees in three northern California cities. "Whew!" you say, "That's too bad . . . at least it wasn't here."

But it could happen in your city. What is your city doing to bolster ethical behavior? Do employees, especially supervisors and managers, understand ethics and the critical role they play in maintaining an ethical workplace? This article is a call for values-based leadership at all levels. Leaders who understand values-based leadership and follow the practical steps listed below will take progressive steps toward developing and sustaining an ethical work environment.

What Are Ethics?

Webster's New World College Dictionary defines ethics as "a system of moral standards or values; a particular moral standard or value." The Josephson Institute defines ethics as the "standards governing the conduct of a person or members of a profession." There are three aspects to ethics:

- Discerning right from wrong.
- Committing to do what is right.
- Doing what is right."

The ICMA publication, *The Ethics Edge*, says ethics is about "good and bad . . . virtue and vice . . . benefit and harm . . . and propriety and impropriety." But, ethics is about values too. Values are defined as "traits, behaviors or qualities to which we ascribe some worth or importance."

Joanne Ciulla, in *Ethics, the Heart of Leadership*, contends that "Ethics is about the assessment and evaluation of values." She defines values as "the ideas and beliefs that influence and direct our choices and actions."

In short, ethics is about behaving—making choices and taking actions—according to one's values that reflect beliefs about how things should be done. The question logically follows, "Whose values are we talking about?" People come into the workplace with their own values, which may or may not be similar to those of the person next to them or yours, for that

matter.

All organizations develop a culture. Culture is simply the “prevailing ideology (beliefs/values) that people carry around in their heads,” according *Diagnosing and Changing Organizational Culture*. Still, what are the values that drive culture? It depends!

What Are Your Values?

As a leader, you have values, too; just as do other leaders in your city. Whose values do you follow? If you are the city manager, does that mean others will buy into yours? Wishful thinking!

On the wall, on its Web site, in its strategic plan, or in other locations your city likely has its values posted, too. Are they the same as yours? How do you get others to buy into the city’s values?

Clarity about values is important. Ansel Adams, the famous photographer of Yosemite, once said, “There is nothing worse than a sharp picture of a fuzzy concept.” A clear understanding about values and what they mean is important for everyone in the workplace, but especially for those in leadership positions. Without clarity, values and ethics remain shadowy. Leaders are responsible for providing clarity.

Why Are Ethics Relevant for the 21st Century?

What are the challenges cities will face in the 21st century? According to the National League of Cities, the following are high-impact issues facing cities:

- The shift from goods and services to a knowledge-based economy while the revenue system remains the same.
- The interaction and flow of revenue between federal, state, and local governments.
- The significant shift in demographics that changes the services needed by residents.
- A rise in antigovernment sentiment coupled with declining civic engagement.
- The safety of communities.

Related to these are a variety of sub-issues such as maintaining constituent trust, public oversight, recruitment and retention of qualified staff, contracting out services, and maintaining employee benefits in the face of rising health care costs.

This list is not intended to be exhaustive but rather to demonstrate that there are a plethora of issues facing cities in the future. Values-based leadership will be needed to bring clarity to what is most important and how the actions of all employees are needed to strengthen trust and commitment toward a commonly understood mission.

What Is Values-Based Leadership?

James O'Toole in *Leading Change—The Argument for Values-Based Leadership* says “At its core . . . values-based leadership is the creation of moral symmetry among those with competing values . . . [it] brings order to the whole by creating transcendent values that provide a tent large enough to hold all the different aspirations, and in which all can find satisfaction.” These tips can be gleaned from O'Toole's book:

- Demonstrate respect by being willing to listen to people's needs and wants, which leads to a trust relationship between leaders and followers.
- Identify the good in followers to create a higher-order view of the common good to create a transcendent vision.
- Demonstrate authenticity and integrity throughout the process.
- Avoid the natural tendency to lead by pushing; instead, pull by inspiring values.
- Make sure the organization acts in consistent ways to build a strong culture.
- Expect spirited debate when people have competing values.

In another expression of values, Darin Brumby, chief information officer of First Group, a U.K.-based company, defined value-based leadership as “choosing to lead your life based on the core values you hold dear . . . an overarching way of looking at the world and choosing a principled way of behaving”¹¹ and suggested:

- Involve everyone and communicate expectations clearly and often.
- Select the values that are core to your beliefs and attitudes about life.
- Positively discriminate and reward behaviors that reflect core values.

In essence, public sector values-based leadership is providing leadership based on values that reflect the output of a collaborative process involving employees and stakeholders. Many cities have developed values in this manner but may have stopped short of tapping into the full potential of the values they created by not ensuring leaders lead in ways that reflect those values. The next section offers some practical steps for bringing values-based leadership to life.

Practical Steps to Values-Based Leadership

As you reflect on the following list of practical steps, check each box that applies to you. Also, consider what steps you need to take to strengthen ethics in the workplace.

- Know your city's values well enough to talk about them comfortably.
- Explain or discuss the relevance of the values and ethics with employees.

¹ Darin Brumby, “Values-Based Leadership” (presentation at National Computing Centre annual conference, October 17–18, 2006, Croyden, Surrey, UK), www.ncc-conference.co.uk/presentations/18th%20October/Darin_Brumby.pdf.

- Describe behaviors consistent with those values.
- Engage employees in dialogue concerning values and ethics.
- Circulate values and ethics literature to raise employee awareness.
- Watch for and recognize employee behavior that is consistent with the city's values.
- Live the values.
- Coach others toward higher value acceptance.
- Debrief values and ethics failures to identify measures to prevent future issues.
- Create an ethics committee or similar body that has specific, though not exclusive, responsibility to promote values-based and ethical behavior.
- Include a values and ethics section in employees' evaluation and promotional processes.
- Develop metrics to track values and ethics efforts.
- Reference values and values-based leadership in recruitment literature.
- Explain how vision and values are linked.
- Use a values-based decision-making model to enhance ethical decisions.
- Admit mistakes and right wrongs to restore trust.

Conclusion

Ethics will play an important role in this century if public sector leaders are to find solutions for the challenges that lie ahead. Values-based leadership is a framework to provide an environment that will raise the ethical bar by bringing clarity to what is important and creating a stronger, more ethical culture. **PM**

Bio

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