



Ethical Leadership in the Public Sector

Leadership is, and has always been, extremely important in government, business and the many institutions in society. Cynthia Schoeman examines why this is particularly true of the public sector and those who hold public office.



The importance of leadership stems from leaders' ability to exert a far greater influence than most other people by virtue of the greater authority, power and visibility, and the easier access to resources which their more senior role affords them. This influence is reflected in leaders being role models for others, often irrespective of whether the leaders intended to be one or not. In this capacity, leaders effectively 'teach' others what is acceptable and desirable by what they say and do, and vice versa.

Bad leadership is regularly exposed in the media for misconduct ranging from fraud to corruption. Such conduct has resulted in jail sentences for businessmen such as Bernard Madoff, the financier whose Ponzi scheme defrauded thousands of investors of an estimated \$18 billion, and for political figures such as Jackie Selebi, South Africa's former

National Police Commissioner and the former chair of Interpol.

Bad political leaders have also lost their positions as evidenced by the consequences of the Arab Spring, which saw popular uprisings unseat the governments of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya in 2011. Corruption among Hosni Mubarak's elite in a country suffering widespread poverty was a major cause for the revolution in Egypt that removed him and his government from power. In Japan the Prime Minister, Naoto Kan, resigned after only 15 months in office following widespread criticism of his handling of the March 2011 earthquake, tsunami and ensuing nuclear crisis and his failure to show leadership after the disaster.

Intending or hoping to hide unethical behaviour is often unsuccessful in the face of technology and a press eager to investigate

and expose wrongdoing.

Good leadership is often interpreted as effective leadership, for example, leaders who achieve the organisations' goals. Good leadership should, however, also imply moral leadership – leadership which upholds sound ethics. Sound ethics means that the leader commits to core moral values, such as honesty, integrity, fairness, respect, responsibility and accountability, and that he/she lives by those values for the betterment of those over whom he/she has influence.

This can extend to the leader taking responsibility for the actions of his followers, as in the case of Oswald Grube, the CEO of UBS, a Swiss global financial services company. Grube resigned after the bank revealed that one of its traders made unauthorized trades that resulted in a \$2.3 billion loss for the company.



Leadership in the public sector is especially relevant, as leaders' influence extends beyond the employees and stakeholders of a single company or group of companies, to a whole country. Whether their leadership is good or bad, therefore, has the potential to impact on huge numbers of people.

In South Africa, numerous incidents have illustrated unethical leadership in government.

In October 2011 Sicele Shiceka, the Minister of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs, was sacked following findings by the Public Protector that he had committed numerous violations of the Executive Ethics Code. At the same time Public Works Minister, Gwen Mahlangu-Nkabinde, was fired for maladministration as regards the police leasing saga.

There are also examples of political leaders being given other posts that appear to reward them instead of holding them accountable for their actions. An example is the former minister of women, youth, children and people with disabilities, Nolutshando Mayende-Sibiya, who was fired and then posted as South Africa's ambassador to Egypt.

The message this sends is that who you know outweighs what you do or don't do, be that misconduct or non-delivery. It also erodes the expectation of leadership accountability, which is a very dangerous outcome. When leaders are not seen to be answerable for their actions, it does not merely undermine a value that is essential for sound political and organisational health - it oils a slippery slope towards autocrats and arbitrary action.

Other evidence of the ethical status of public sector leaders is the perceived level of public sector corruption. While corruption in government may not necessarily exactly reflect the extent of bad leadership, there would certainly be a correlation. Two recent surveys of the South African public sector reveal dismal results. Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index measures the perceived level of public sector corruption, where 10 signifies highly clean and 0 highly corrupt. In 2010 South Africa scored only 4.5, which declined further in 2011 to 4.1, placing South Africa 64th out of

the 182 countries surveyed. Adding to this, a survey by research company TNS South Africa found that 85% of adults feel there is corruption in senior levels of government.

In order to address this measure of unethical leadership, it is necessary to explore the contributing factors.

One such factor is the common tendency to rationalise or justify unethical behaviour. The perpetrator finds an excuse to rid himself/herself of the guilt and culpability. This self-administered exoneration, unfortunately, also tends to allow the repetition of such behaviour. A much-used justification in South Africa is the injustices of the past, which often manifests itself as a sense of entitlement. While the wrongs of the past are undisputed, this leads to a classic situation of compounding one wrong with another. Irrespective of the past, it still does not add up to a right. Rather, it sends a message that placing your own interests and gain above others is acceptable.

A further factor which is particular to South Africa arises from the ethical dilemma of a right versus right choice: when one must choose between two morally right options. Four examples of right versus right dilemmas are the choices which exist between short term versus long term, individual versus community, justice versus mercy, and honesty versus loyalty. These are often the most difficult ethical decisions a leader will need to make, far surpassing an easier right versus wrong situation.

The conflict between truth or honesty versus loyalty is specifically pertinent. It may not, at first sight, appear to be a difficult ethical dilemma because, for many people, honesty is the stronger value. It can, however, present a hard choice when the bonds of loyalty among colleagues or comrades are very strong. When people have shared a profound experience - as those who were part of the struggle for freedom in South Africa - it, understandably, builds extraordinary bonds of loyalty. This presents a choice of supporting a long-standing friend or comrade who is guilty of misconduct in the name of loyalty versus reporting him/her for a breach of ethics in the name of honesty.

While the choice in favour of loyalty may be understandable, it nonetheless still serves to condone unethical behaviour.

How, then, do we increase the ethical leadership in our public sector?

Much as leadership development and ethics training may spring to mind as solutions, these actions will not necessarily resolve the problem. That's because almost all people already understand the difference between right and wrong and between ethical and unethical behaviour: A lack of understanding of the issue or even of the consequences of misconduct is not the problem or the challenge. Instead, ethical behaviour is the result of a choice, and therefore the focus should be on how to influence that choice.

In an organisation, values, rules and group culture are key influencing factors. However, ironically, leadership is widely recognised as the most effective way to influence people to be ethical.

But who influences the leaders?

South Africa already has good, comprehensive rules, regulations and laws - most notably the Constitution - which address almost all areas of misconduct. Therefore, the levers that remain to effect a change are the influence of fellow leaders, their commitment to sound values, and peer-pressure from the culture surrounding them.

Although the citizens can make a difference - by, for example, exercising their vote to hold leaders to account and by using mechanisms such as the Public Protector and the newly established Corruption Watch - the real difference ultimately rests on political will - on the choice to be the ethical leaders the country needs.

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