Donald G. Zauderer

Winning with Integrity

In the long run, government effectiveness will be enhanced when managers become more aware of the role of integrity in decisionmaking.

Hardly a week goes by that we do not hear about transgressions of integrity by public executives. While the number of such incidents are few in relation to the tens of thousands of federal state and local government executives, there is no doubt they have reduced the public's trust in government.

The seriousness of this situation prompted the editors of *The Public Manager* to print a series of articles (Integrity in Government) clarifying laws, guidelines, and enforcement mechanisms aimed at eliminating existing or potential conflicts of interest. Dennis F. Thompson argues, for example, that clear ethical standards induce officials to make decisions on the basis of merit rather than considerations of private gain.[1] Robert E. Cleary reviews a variety of ethics codes and concludes that there is a coherent body of ethical thought specifying proper conduct in the field of public administration.[2] Rosslyn Kleeman identifies some of the gray areas in federal conflict of interest governing behavior on the job and after leaving the public service.[3] Carol Lewis provides a framework from which to examine the ethical implications of decisions, particularly those that arise in the information resource management field.[4]

These articles draw attention to legal and technical requirements in public service that address real or perceived conflicts of interest. They are important. However, public executives should also be aware of universal and timeless principles that transcend legal and technical requirements. These principles provide a broader ethical base. They are often overlooked or assumed in discussions of executive integrity. The principles focus on the moral duties and obligations that guide relationships between individuals and within society. A manager, for example, can cause much harm by not delivering on promises, stereotyping minority employees, humiliating an employee in front of others, or by neglecting to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the organization. These actions, while not unlawful, transgress standards of integrity that create harm to people, organizations, and society.

What principles of integrity, then, should guide the thinking and behavior of public executives? In attempting to gain clarity on the question, this writer conducted a search into religion, moral philosophy, management, psychology, and various public administration codes of ethics. The purpose was to identify behaviors and formulate a code that serves as an integrity guide for public sector executives. Thirteen principles of integrity were identified.[5]

Intensive interviews with several government executives were then conducted to identify positive examples of integrity that go beyond legal requirements. The interviewees were promised anonymity, and all references to agencies were disguised with the exception of stories that appeared in the media. These stories reveal a side of agency life that is rarely written about but commonly discussed in private. They demonstrate how a manager's integrity can strengthen employee loyalty and commitment. Following are the principles of personal integrity that emerged from the inquiry.

Principles of Integrity

- Evaluate moral considerations when faced with a complex problem. Encourage others to come forward to air concerns. Listen to their views, weigh relevant interests and values, take the trouble to understand the facts, and examine personal motives and the consequences of actions.
- **Safeguard the public trust** by promoting an ethical work environment. Place loyalty to the law and ethical principles above private gain. Set a positive example and avoid even the appearance of impropriety. Direct efforts toward the larger purpose of the organization. Strive for excellence. Stay well informed and build understanding of current problems, future trends, and professional developments.
- **Take risks** by opposing unjust acts. Refuse to go along with actions that are ethically wrong. Withstand pressure from others in defense of principled actions. Intervene when people are planning or carrying out an immoral

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act. Encourage and support others who call attention to wrongdoing. Take appropriate action after weighing the competing claims of loyalty to organization, respect for authority, and sensitivity to the need for confidentiality.

- **Exhibit humility** by keeping self importance in perspective. Avoid unbridled ambition and emphasizing rank and status differences. Stimulate dialogue, listen to and respect the competence and views of others, and respond to legitimate concerns. Build a climate of mutual trust and respect.

Respect the dignity of individuals by giving earned recognition, inviting and giving genuine consideration to suggestions, and exhibiting courteous behavior.

- **Communicate truthfully**, especially on matters about which individuals have the right to know. Do not intentionally deceive others. Strive for congruence between espoused values and values-in-use. Refuse to distort information for the purpose of telling superiors what they want to hear.
- **Deal fairly** to avoid providing special advantage or disadvantage because of affiliations or positions. Strive to find the proper balance between conflicting interests. Refuse to let official action be influenced by personal relationships. Give others credit for their ideas and build on their contributions. Preserve the fundamental right of individuals to free consent, privacy, free speech, due process, and other forms of fair treatment. Provide equal opportunity for all employees regardless of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, or disability. Provide parties with the necessary information to compete on an equal basis.
- **Honor agreements** by following through on commitments..Comply with both the spirit and letter of agreements. Refrain from disclosing information given in confidence.
- **Accept blame** by acknowledging personal responsibility. Seek to understand one's role in an issue. Commit to improving future performance.
- **Respect the dignity of individuals** by giving earned recognition, inviting and giving genuine consideration to suggestions, and exhibiting courteous behavior. Treat employees as valuable and unique, not simply as vehicles for getting the work done. Respect differences in personality, values, beliefs, and life style. Reject stereotypes that give rise to racism, sexism, and ageism. Avoid criticizing employees in front of others. Provide associates with information to make informed judgments on decisions that will affect their lives.
- **Suppress envy** by celebrating the ability and good fortune of others. Build rapport and partnerships to strengthen organizational performance.
- **Support employee development** by building the next generation to their full potential. Strive to enable subordinates to grow in areas of interest, underdeveloped abilities, and career aspirations. See the flat sides of subordinates as opportunities for growth, rather than fixed traits or weaknesses. Provide candid feedback, coaching, and training, as well as realistic assessments of career opportunities within the organization.
- **Forgive** individuals for mistakes or wrongdoings. Constrain the urge to hold grudges and get even. Appeal to the positive nature in others, particularly their capacity to forgive, to see through stereotypes, and build a stronger community. Stay focused on larger organizational goals.
- **Extend self** for others by providing help in times that matter. Show special consideration for special circumstances.

Selected Cases of Integrity

Managers who strive to do the right thing often create a process to clarify ethical issues. The following example is a case in point. Tom Smith was director of the taxpayer compliance measurement program at the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). At periodic intervals, the staff would randomly select 50,000 people representing different income levels to conduct a line-by-line audit of their tax return. The program enables IRS to understand where most errors are made to ensure greater compliance. It is the kind of audit that is time consuming, with no compensation or reward for citizens subjected to it.

During this period, one of the social security numbers selected was the vice president of the United States. This created a certain consternation inside the unit. It would have been possible to excuse the vice president and select another individual, thus avoiding any kind of problem with the White House. Tom Smith called a meeting with people from audit, part of IRS, legislative affairs, office of the legal counsel, and internal audit. He told participants, "Regardless of how you feel personally about the issue, let us get the pros and cons on the table that might be involved if we were to include or exclude the vice president."

Some argued that the vice president was as much at risk for an audit as any other American, and his position should in no way exempt him from the audit pool. They claimed that the IRS has an obligation to the American public to treat each person in the same manner. On the other side of the coin, people maintained that exempting him from the audit would in no way influence the validity of the program. Furthermore, the auditing of the vice president could create the impression in the media, which has a tendency to distort events, that the IRS was responding to alleged wrong doing. The meeting was adjourned to let people think about the issue. Tom told the group to come back in two days to consider whether other avenues should be explored. When the group reconvened, the majority opinion was that the audit should go forward.

Tom set up an appointment with the commissioner, and gave him all the reasons, pro and con. He added one other argument. He said to the commissioner, "We have no right to eliminate the vice president without his consent. If it ever got out that we had done this, there would always be a question as to whether or not he had influenced the decision." The commissioner agreed and told the agency to go ahead with the audit. The vice president was notified in the same manner as the other participants. The vice president subsequently called the commissioner, thanked him, and said, "I understand completely and I wouldn't have wanted it any other way." Ultimately, the story was released by the White House and reported in the newspapers.

Safeguard the Public Trust

As Jim Hebert found out, placing a high value on loyalty to law can lead to painful choices and consequences—especially in the short run. Jim was an assistant secretary of an enforcement branch of a federal agency. The agency was having a difficult time getting a handle on a money laundering scheme that involved Benny Rogers and a Swiss bank. In an effort to obtain information, a group of intelligence officers dreamed up a plan to hire a woman to entice Benny Rogers from his hotel room in Switzerland. They knew that he carried important records that would implicate him in the scheme. When he had vacated the room, an intelligence officer got a key to his room and took the records. He then photographed the records, and returned the original documents to Benny's room. The intelligence group was pleased with its work and expected much praise but surprisingly Jim Hebert was very critical of its investigative practices. He felt that there was no justification for breaking the law in the name of upholding the law. He refused to allow the records to be used and he took disciplinary action against the investigators.

Jim's actions in this situation engendered a strong negative response. He was brought before a congressional investigating committee and criticized for his actions. A grand jury was formed to consider indicting him. He maintained throughout the controversy that it was inappropriate for the investigators to acquire evidence in an unlawful manner. He constantly preached that the end did not justify the means and that to do so would taint the reputation of the agency.

Agency personnel were divided on the issue. The intelligence people hated him, but others considered him a hero because he upheld the principle of loyalty to law as a living ideal for the agency. In the end, neither the grand jury nor the congressional committee took adverse action against Jim. When asked whether he would do it again, he said, "This has been one of the most painful experiences of my life, but I can look myself in the mirror and know that I did the right thing to protect the agency."

Take Risks

The president of the United States wanted to give a tax rebate to all Americans. He initiated this action a year before the election and hoped that the rebate would solidify his status with the voting public. The program evaluation branch was directed to come up with a study that would

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"Make sure everything is done ethically. Within reason, of course."

demonstrate that this action would create higher employment and more tax revenues.

When the analysis was completed, Tom Marshall and his staff provided an overview of the results to Bob Clearmont, the assistant secretary. Tom said, "The results do not support what the president wants to do." Bob replied, "I'm sure that you can do something that will lead to the proper conclusion." Tom said, "Mr. Secretary, we have gone over this from A to Z, but unfortunately the data do not support the desired bottom line." Bob retorted, "Of course you can. You can do anything you want with the data." He then requested that all staff members leave the room and proceeded to tell Tom that loyalty to the administration is very important and that he should provide data to support what the president needed to justify this initiative to Congress and the American people. "I'm afraid, Tom, you're not the kind of person that we want in this administration." Tom said, "Given the Hatch Act, I should not be subjected to this kind of political pressure. I'm simply calling the shots as I see them."

Tom went back to his office not knowing if he would have a job. He decided to discuss the incident with the deputy secretary, Harold Leiner. When Tom told him what had happened, he was assured that his job was not in jeopardy. Three months later, Bob Clearmont was gone from the agency. Tom was greatly relieved, but understood that it could have gone the other way.

Deal Fairly

Bill Qualters was a high-level political appointee who strived to treat all individuals fairly. His treatment of Jeanette Bater illustrates what one individual can do to create a more just organizational environment for women.

Jeanette Bater held a GS-15 position for 10 years. She had one disappointment after another in attempting to break into the executive ranks of government. When a US presi-

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dent imposed a wage and price freeze, Bill's agency was given the job of implementing it. Congress soon authorized a number of supergrade jobs to implement the freeze. Jeanette applied for one of those jobs. She was the only one in the entire agency who had any experience in the area of wage and price controls. Despite her background, she wasn't designated among the best qualified and wasn't interviewed. She then competed for a supergrade position in information management. She had previous experience as chief of services in another agency. This time she was among the three best qualified but was not selected.

At the time, Bill Qualters was deputy secretary. He signed all senior level appointments, after reviewing the backgrounds of all qualified candidates. He looked at Jeanette's background and called her to his office. They talked for a couple of hours. He wanted to know why she had been passed over for so many positions. After a thorough discussion of her background and accomplishments, she asked him, "Mr. Qualters, can you tell me what is wrong with me?" He said, "Jeanette, I haven't the faintest idea, but believe me I'm going to do something about it." The agency soon found a supergrade position for Jeanette. She became a deputy assistant secretary and then the assistant secretary. A year later Jeanette got a note from Bill Qualters. He was in private practice at that time and she went over to his office. He concluded the conversation by saying, "I still have friends in the administration, and if you know of any women who are being discriminated against as you were, let me know."

Summing Up

These stories from inside the government bureaucracy are not about major public policy initiatives reported in the media; they are about managers with integrity dealing with commonplace dilemmas in a way that builds healthy and effective organizations with committed employees.

- Tom Smith recommended that the IRS go forward with auditing the tax return of the vice president of the United States.
- Jim Hebert refused to use unlawfully obtained evidence in a government investigation.
- Tom Marshall refused to manipulate data to support a proposed presidential initiative.
- Bill Qualters demanded fair treatment for a woman who had been unfairly passed over for promotion to executive positions.

All these individuals treated people as they would wish to be treated; they strived to do the right thing and took risks to defend just principles and ideals. These behaviors demonstrate how people of integrity operate when they hold positions of power.

Many organizations would like to find ways to encourage managers to take the high road in their interactions with others. In fact, much can be done to build a climate where integrity is taken into account in decisionmaking. The first step is to define the standards expected of everyone. Training programs and socialization processes can inform people about organizational standards of conduct. Senior management can emphasize these standards in speeches, policy statements, and personal behavior. Integrity should also be formally established as an assessment criteria for promotions. Questions dealing with integrity could be incorporated in organizational climate surveys.

All of these actions will reinforce the message that employees at every level are expected to bring integrity to their jobs and their relationships with fellow workers, suppliers, customers, and the community. In the long run, government effectiveness will be enhanced when managers become more aware of the role of integrity in decisionmaking. ★

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