

Stewardship Ethics: A Concept fit to deal with Dilemmas in Ethical Leadership?

Prof. P. G. le Roux
Research Professor
Faculty of Management
Central University of Technology, Free State
BLOEMFONTEIN
pleroux@cut.ac.za

Prof. L.O.K. Lategan
Dean: Research and Innovation
Central University of Technology, Free State
BLOEMFONTEIN
llategan@cut.ac.za

Samevatting

Die handhawing van etiese waardes en norme word nog steeds as 'n voorvereiste vir die openbare besluitnemingsprosesse en effektiewe regering beskou. Dié diensleweringaspek as vernaamste funksie van die openbare sektor word toenemend deur 'n gebrek aan toegewyde leierskap en die afwesigheid van 'n duidelik gedefinieerde waardestelsel geskaad. Leierskapevolusie is noodsaaklik in 'n hoogs diverse en mededingende omgewing waarin van die moderne leier verwag word om struktuur te gee aan etiese beginsels en 'n rentmeester te wees van alle hulpbronne toevertrou deur die kieserspubliek.

'n Volhoubare toekoms staan direk afhanklik te wees van 'n etiese rentmeesterskapsbenadering waarin leiersfigure die openbare belang eerbiedig. Hierdie artikel plaas die resente politieke verwikkeling, veral op plaaslike owerheidsvlak, in perspektief. Etiek en verantwoordelike leierskap word as normatiewe vertrekpunte binne die bestaande staatsbestel in konteks geplaas. Die rol van die etiese leier spesifiek afgestem op die rentmeesterbenadering, word beredeneer as moontlike

oplossing vir die onstabiele politieke omgewing, gepaardgaande met gebrekkige dienslewering aan die kieserspubliek.

1. Introduction

2009 was a year of political challenges and turmoil in South Africa. The July 2009 local government unrest/strike [which emanated from a salary dispute between the South African Local Government Association (SALGA) and the South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU), together with the Independent Municipal and Allied Trade Union (IMATU) members] re-activated the debate on service delivery and leadership. A variety of economic and social factors such as food inflation, high transport cost; the economic crisis and the unemployment rate forced the workers to air their grievances. Even more deep rooted grievances like poor management and leadership were amongst the list of grievances. The auditor-general in his 2007-2008 Financial Report on Local Government Finances, reported that almost half (45%) of all municipalities have engaged in unauthorized, fruitless and wasteful expenditure. SAMWU bluntly put the blame for the local government financial state of affairs on the management "... yet it is management with their hugely inflated salaries and outrageous performance bonuses, who are responsible for the sorry state of so many municipalities. How can municipalities engage in this kind of expenditure, but not accede to a decent wage increase?" (SAMWU Press Statement, 2009).

The vicious circle of demands, together with the cry for the implementation of the April 2009 election promises, put a challenging burden on the leadership structure to act with integrity. It is claimed that ethical leadership must command respect and drive an acceptable value system what a nation would want to identify with.

South Africa is entering a very challenging and delicate stage in the development of our relatively young democracy. Decisions, actions and behaviours in all three spheres of government have a direct impact on the life and well-being of each individual citizen. Therefore a pre-requisite for orderly governance is the quest for undisputable leadership able to manage proper service delivery through sound decision making and acceptable ethical norms and values.

2. Background

In the running-up to the 2009 elections, ANC President, Jacob Zuma stated that corruption won't be tolerated. In his inaugural address as fourth democratic president of South Africa, he reiterated this view in the following words: "we must hold ourselves to the highest standards of service, probity and integrity" (Zuma, 2009).

In 2010 during the ANC 98th Anniversary celebrations, he even articulated his stance against corruption more robustly by saying: “corruption factionalism, nepotism and poor delivery were at the root of many of the violent protests occurring across the country” and the solution lies (in) “a legion of leaders who remain icons and shining examples of true African leadership and excellence” (ANC: 98th Anniversary, 2010).

Since his inauguration in May 2009 President Zuma constantly highlighted the role of leadership in combating corruption and to ensure proper service delivery. In his State of the Nation Address in February 2010, he promised a “government (that) must work faster, harder and smarter ... to improve the effectiveness of local government ... (with) efforts to eradicate corruption and fraud” (Zuma, 2010).

This attitude is not new. The previous Minister of Public Service and Administration, Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi, echoed the same sentiment. She said:

The impact of unethical and criminal practices in the public sector is unsupportable in the development of nations, resulting in a loss of confidence in public institutions and an erosion of the rule of law itself. Certain corruption perception studies show a high degree of mistrust by the public of their governments (Fraser-Moleketi, 2005).

These viewpoints received local and international support for the mere fact that corruption has been identified as the major barrier to economical and social development in developing countries and considerable research has been done into the causes and the solutions to corruption. South Africa is no exception in this regard. Research has shown that the outcry against corruption is not simply due to a moral concern or a matter of ethical principles only. Corruption has a very negative effect on government’s performance and on the wellbeing of individual citizens (ISS Conference, 2008). Corruption can therefore be regarded as the public enemy number one. When corruption is widespread, it diminishes the quality of life of an entire nation, especially those who are poor. It breeds other crimes and erodes the moral fibre of society (South Africa, 2008).

Defeating corruption at all spheres of government has been regarded as a priority by the South African Government for the past number of years. A number of impressive strides have been taken to make South Africa an unfriendly environment for fraud and corruption. The most prominent initiative was probably the Public Service Anti-Corruption Strategy (2002), which was aimed at the prevention, detection and investigation of corruption in the public sector. This strategy laid the foundation for a number of laws aimed at combating corruption. Examples are:

- *Prevention and Combating of Corrupt Activities Act* of 2004;
- *Public Finance Management Act* of 2003.

The objectives of these strategic endeavours and legislation are very clear and sound, namely:

- encouraging a culture within local government where all employees, the public and other stakeholders continuously behave with, and promote integrity in their dealings with, or on behalf of municipalities;
- improving accountability, efficiency and effective administration within municipalities including decision-making and management conduct which promotes integrity;
- developing an anti-corruption capacity within municipalities;
- improving the application of systems, policies, procedures, rules and regulations within municipalities;
- changing aspects within municipalities that undermine institutional integrity and facilitate unethical conduct, fraud and corruption and allow these to go unnoticed or unreported; and
- encouraging all employees and other stakeholders to strive towards the promotion of integrity and for the prevention and detection of unethical conduct (South Africa, 2008).

It appears at face value that these strategies were not successful and hence did not (yet) contribute towards the improvement of the service delivery of local and provincial government in general. This state of the art sparks many questions. One of them – as the focus of the article – is: was/is there enough emphasis on leadership development with special reference to ethical leadership?

3. Research premises

This study will be primarily a qualitative literature review. The purpose of the literature review is to build the thesis that ethical leadership can assist the restoration of the moral decline of public leadership. The concept of stewardship ethics will be introduced to support the thesis of the paper.

This paper accepts the premise that ethical leadership can support the restoration of the collapse of poor public leadership and performance. It also subscribes to the notion that a shrinking moral fabric of society is due to a decline/absence of ethical leadership. The paper builds on another premise namely that a growth in ethical leadership will bring about moral commitment – something almost non-existing at all levels of service delivery.

The article's assertions are based on the following premises:

3.1 The importance of an organisational ethic

In probably one of the most read cases in management and business, “*The parable of the Sadhu*”, McCoy (1997) uses this case study to tackle the problems of individual versus group commitment; personal ambition and corporate loyalty. McCoy (1997:7) states that in a complex corporate situation, the individual requires and deserves the support of the group:

When people cannot find such support in their organisations, they don't know how to act. If such support is forthcoming, a person has a stake in the success of the group and can add much to the process of establishing and maintaining a corporate culture.

For ethics to be part of a company's management philosophy, it is imperative that the company should be ethically fit for this challenge. This begins with the mutual value between employers and employees. Amongst other things, mutual value is reflected in the business organisation's realising that no organisation can operate without people and that people should take responsibility for what they are doing. McCoy (1997:4) remarks that

No one person was willing to assume ultimate responsibility ... Each was willing to do his bit just as long as it was not too inconvenient. When it got to be a bother, everyone just passed the buck to someone else and took off.

One can conclude from this parable that group expectations and behaviour will have an impact on one's professional performance. This in no way means that the group's view is the ethical one – ethics is not a case of democracy. The guiding question here should be what is the general view on a matter and what would universally be expected to be the guiding principle? Although this case study is open-ended, the underlying assumption is that the group influences the individual but that the attitude of an individual also challenges group behaviour.

3.2 Corporate citizenship

Corporate citizenship is a more overarching terminology than corporate governance. It can be defined as the moral commitment to the organisation. Here the organisation – as the collective of the individuals – behaves similar to what one will associate with good citizenship. It is expected from companies to take charge of their overall responsibility towards the broader society. If not integrated into the organisational framework, ethical responsibility will remain an ideal. Van Wyk (2008) rightfully argues that ethical codes are no guarantee that people will act ethically and it becomes obvious that a company's corporate values should embrace personal values and *vice versa*. Sullivan (2005) identifies negative behaviour such as anxiety and anger as characteristic of the modern workplace. It appears that occupational calling no longer

exists and that it has been replaced by technocracy. This should now be replaced by responsible engagement and self-regulation.

3.3 Ethical principles

Five ethical principles can be presented for this study (see Lategan, 2008):

Principle one: No ethical model can be value-free. Ethics is based on life view and orientation (ethos).

Principle two: Ethics is not about the evaluation of a conflicting situation or decline of moral behaviour only. Ethics are principles in action via the application of norms/values.

Principle three: Since one is dealing with ethical challenges, ethical growth to the desired situation must always be linked to making decisions and responsible acts.

Principle four: Professional behaviour must incorporate the notions of responsible acts, making decisions and growth.

Principle five: Professional ethics will be informed by principles such as responsibility, obedience, respect for others, oneself, possessions, the environment, not to steal, not to lie, not to desire what isn't yours, to live the truth, to be of service to one's fellow person, not to do harm, to be committed although other people might not follow suit, not to compare other's weak outputs and to follow their behaviour, etc.

4. Conceptualising ethics and leadership

In the discussion of ethical leadership it is important to concentrate on how ethics affects leadership and not necessarily how ethical leadership assists to reach specific goals. The challenge is to reach synergy between ethics – a system of normative standards or principles and leadership – the position to make decisions within the process of influencing people in a responsible and credible way.

4.1 What is ethics?

The core aspect of ethics is normative love [as distinguished from religious love (central love command) and erotic/romantic love]. Core to normative love is moral faithfulness/truthfulness. Bearing in mind that the various aspects of reality are interwoven with each other, ethics can be defined as moral faithfulness/truthfulness in all human activities. This faithfulness/truthfulness is characterised by responsible acts (J. Douma), decisions-making (J. Fisher) and growth (R. Burggraeve).

To elaborate on this:

Responsible acts: Douma (1983, 1999) works with the notion of *ethics as responsible acts* (“*verantwoordelijke handeling*”) of man towards God and his fellow persons.

Responsible acts are informed by ethical principles and can be described as the implementation/application of these acts. Responsible acts signal that no act can be value-free. Responsibility is fundamental to ethical behaviour. Responsible acts are understood in the context of good and bad and include a range of acts.

Making choices: Fisher (2000, 2001) defines ethics as *making choices*. Religious, family and educational values inform the choices people make. In making choices, a person's individual conviction will be the leading instrument. The value of his perspective is that ethics is not only about judging a situation, but also to make a choice based on one's ethical orientation.

Growth ethics: Burggraeve (2000) works with a growth ethic. Fundamental to this ethics is the approach that although the ethical choices one makes might not be the perfect choice, it is still aiming at meeting the ideal for the situation. The choices taken, will guide one to always aspire to the ideal situation.

4.2 What is leadership?

Lewis Laphan defines leadership as follows:

Leadership consists not in degrees of technique but in traits of character, it requires moral rather than athletic or intellectual effort, and it imposes on both leader and follower alike the burdens of self-restraint (Laphan in Price, 2008).

In a knowledge-driven world, the power to lead is shifting to the power to promote new ideas, a better way, based on innovation. Individual "shows the way" for others. The above-mentioned dimension of leadership still requires from the new generation leaders to exhibit both their values and their ethics in their leadership style and actions (Mc Crimmon, 2009).

Leadership is therefore about those who are in a position to make decisions and create opinions. Role modelling is the keyword and not leadership, which has degenerated into orchestrating operational issues. Responsibility and credibility are generally speaking the two most important elements of leadership.

Laphan's arguments strongly call for leadership as the process of influencing people while operating to meet organisational objectives and improving the organisation through change. Leaders do no command excellence – they build excellence (Laphan in Price, 2008).

5. Ethical leadership

5.1 The role of responsibility

Leadership and its applications have different nuances in the various spheres of the public life. For the business leader the achieving of specific goals is the driving force

behind his/her leadership. Leaders with management skills can effectively plan and decisively execute strategies. The charismatic leader represents the power of emotions and passions that have the ability to move masses of people into a certain direction to achieve particular goals. The transformational leader is active in problem-solving and in the rethinking of organisational restructuring processes.

The ethical leader represents moral conduct, duty, judgment, calling and commitment. The application of ethical leadership is based on the distinction between right and wrong. Ethics (as implied – see again subsection 4.1) is about making choices. In making choices, a person’s individual conviction will be the leading instrument. No ethical choice can be made without taking into consideration the important role of responsibility. Responsibility is a normative value executed by the individual based on his/her value system. Within the framework of ethical leadership one can learn from Badaracco’s (1998:5-14) “spheres of responsibility”. He presents a framework for making choices on the basis of four identified spheres:

Sphere of responsibility	Contents of responsibility
1. Personal ethical values	1. Personal values consist of the duties, commitments and ideals that shape and guide individuals’ lives.
2. Responsibilities as economic agents	2. As economic agents, managers have the fiduciary duty to serve the interests of their company’s stakeholders.
3. Responsibilities as organisation leaders	3. As organisation leaders, managers’ decisions and actions have significant consequences for the lives, livelihoods and well-being of their employees.
4. Responsibilities in cooperative capitalism	4. Managers’ ethical responsibilities do not stop at the boundaries of their companies. This is true not only in dealing with other firms, but also in dealing with international / globalised companies.

What is evident from these spheres of responsibility is that the individual’s commitment to responsible acts is the basis for all other responsibilities. Responsibility has two faces. It starts with an individual value system that needs to spill over to a public value system. No one can ignore the influence of a public value system on individual behavior. This is, however, the challenge. Currently public ethical commitments are absent in society. This collapse is perceived as ultimately negative –

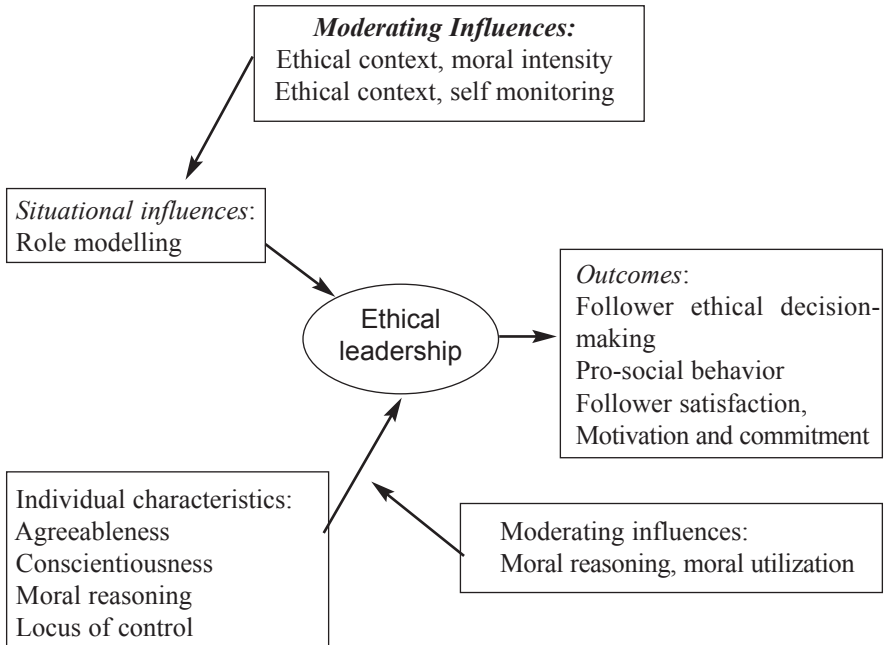
to such an extent that people’s individual commitment cannot install new ethical behavior. It is for this reason that there must be returned to public ethical leadership.

An appropriate example of the influence of the group on individual responsibility is evident from Machiavellian leaders who are motivated to manipulate others in order to accomplish their own goals. *The Prince* (1513) written by Machiavelli (1469-1527) is the cornerstone of such a philosophy – a philosophy endorsed by and suitable for medieval politicians. In the true sense of the word a philosophy which denies any connection between ethics and leadership (Hussein, 2007).

Machiavelli is only one example of a strong and influential world leader. Leadership cannot be regarded as a *neutral term*. History has proven that some leaders were guilty of an immoral use of the tremendous power the leadership position granted the incumbent.

Ethical leadership is often painted as a “soft” leadership. A more acceptable approach is however the challenge for the ethical leader to apply the right amount of authority in each situation.

Brown and Trevino created an *Ethical leadership construct* – a construction in which they quantify the positive influence and outcomes of ethical leadership.



(Brown, 2006: 595-596, as adopted)

From this flow diagram it is evident that ethical leaders are to act as individuals and collectively considering ethical values in its thinking and decision-making. The impact of such decision-making on organisational behavior and the surrounding society can affect a series of positive outcomes.

Ethical means – the process

Hussein (2007) combines ethical behavior (person) and ethical decision-making (the process) as a major responsibility of a leader ensuring ethical organisational practices. Different circumstances will ask for different actions, coping with these situations called for a well defined and a clear set of institution policies and procedures, guiding and protecting organisational systems, resources and the governance process.

Ethical leadership – the individual

Ethical leadership, organisational ethics and social responsibility can be regarded as inseparable concepts within the functional domain of any organisation. The ethical leader as a dominant role player in this environment needs to align him/herself with these concepts by demonstrating distinguished characteristics of ethical leadership. The model summarises it under individual characteristics.

For the ethical leader to be effective, efficient and excellent, the four components of ethical leadership, namely *purpose*, *knowledge*, *authority* and *trust* must be understood and developed (EPIC, 2006).

Freeman and Steward (2006) blend these four components of ethical leadership with business strategies as they brand the global ethical leader as somebody who can accomplish the following:

Purpose: Someone who articulate and embody the purpose and values of the organisation – with the focus on organisational success rather than personal ego. The emphasis is to use ethics as a strategy in the fulfillment of organisational aims and objectives.

Knowledge: Know the limits of the values and ethical principles they live and find the best people to develop them. Individuals must be aware of their own strengths and limitations in their leaders' role.

Authority: Make tough calls while being imaginative and frame actions in ethical terms.

Trust: Create a living conversation about ethics, values and take a charitable understanding of other's values.

6. The ethical leader – the stewardship approach

Based on the arguments thusfar, the authors would like to propose that the approach needed to be taken by the ethical leader is that of *stewardship*. Stewardship originates from a religious orientation that humans are responsible for the world and should take care of it. The term embodies the idea that personal responsibility should be extended to include other people's property and financial affairs on a voluntary basis. This means that one person must take care of another person and his/her property or financial affairs as if it is the person's own. This by no means implies that ownership is hijacked, but the mere fact that something is not personally owned does not mean that one does not have to care for it. Generally speaking stewardship refers to a responsibility to take care of something one does not own (Wikipedia, 2009).

The term 'stewardship' has over the few past years gained acceptance in governance and policy debates. In the past the concept was often used very narrowly, but in recent years it is broadened as a governance process linked to the idea of *good governance*: "... contain a number of guiding principles for creating effective and legitimate dialogue processes involving government, industry and citizens; in delineating their respective governance responsibilities" (Saner, 2003:1).

In a stewardship work community the leader's power is shared with each subordinate – stewardship is therefore a collective idea, suggesting that leadership is most successfully demonstrated by sharing power and responsibility with others in the work community. In this way, the workplace becomes one – a united and a true community (Fairholm, 2001).

Caldwell and Hayes (2008) in their article "Ethical Stewardship – Implications for Leadership and Trust" put a new dimension or focus on the role of a leader, namely that "great leaders" are ethical stewards who generate high levels of commitment from followers. As in the case of Fairholm, their concept of ethical stewardship has its roots in a stakeholder theory. A theory in which managers/leaders practice a special type of leadership with the following core elements:

- The leader-follower relationship is established as a dyadic one-on-one relationship.
- The relationship established is transformational with the focus on group goals and organisational needs and not individual needs.
- The relationship incorporates both implicit and explicit social contacts of commitment and performance of those who they lead.
- Each follower participant interprets the relationship based upon subjective self-perception. The ethical steward is viewed through the individual lens of each follower.

- The focus of ethical stewardship is long-term based rather than short-term based.
- Ethical stewardship demands the constant management of meaning. It acknowledges that meanings are in people with regard to basic values, beliefs and attitudes.

The benefits of an ethical stewardship approach are undisputable the following:

- It provides a valuable alternative that can reverse the deterioration in public trust that characterises society;
- It assists leaders to reframe their moral responsibilities and honour the duties that they owe society;
- It builds trust within the organisation and improves employee commitment and a sustainable competitive advantage (Caldwell, 2008: 161).

7. Conclusion

Confidence in the South African public sector is constantly being shaken by numerous claims, acquisitions and evidence of fraud, incidents of mismanagement and a lack of services. An analysis of public services and associated leadership suggests that a value system has collapsed. This is complemented by a general plea for a recommitment to ethical leadership. The public is questioning the integrity, responsibility and commitment of public servants. It is not uncommon to hear that the public asks what has happened to an ethics of calling, service and stewardship in the public sector. What is more alarming is the fact that, what is being presented as ethics in the public sector is also being questioned. General consensus exists that the debate on ethical leadership should be high on the public agenda.

From a scientific perspective, this development is supported by strategic management philosophy's attempts to fuse ethical aspects such as the value of leadership. It is argued that leadership is responsible for creating an environment of stewardship and ethical practices in which decisions and actions conform to moral and professional principles. The continuous enforcement and modelling of leadership is a prerequisite for effective and orderly governance and to add citizen value to the electorate in general.

Ethical leadership can therefore be regarded as a vital tool in sustainable development dealing with complex and problematic issues in the public sector.

This paper identified the benefits of actively managing the strategic ethical process in conjunction with a strong emphasis on leadership development. The article outlined three aspects of ethical leadership, namely:

- The characteristics of ethical leadership
- A framework for ethical leadership
- The application of ethical leadership

The article presents stewardship as a core value for ethical leadership. The importance of stewardship is that one takes voluntary responsibility for something which is not owned by the individual. This care for something that doesn't belong to one – to be a keeper of somebody else's interests – is what is needed in all spheres of public life again.

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