Understanding Ethical Competence in the General Sense

The definition and understanding of ethical competence in public administration has evolved and changed over time. Many definitions are useful in understanding what it means to the profession. Most definitions focus on the essential characteristics that form an ethically competent administrator. Friedrich and Gaus defined it as *professional responsibility*. This definition included the facets of accountability and the rational and moral exercise of discretionary power (Plant pg. 190). Over time, others have posited additions such as the capacity to recognize ethical issues, to conform to moral values and norms, and includes descriptions of what constitutes non-ethical behavior (Plant, pg. 191). Our understanding of ethical competence can be broadened when we consider the ethical codes and definitions of professional associations. These incorporate expectations for integrity, serving in the public interest, respecting the Constitution, and others. Of particular use are the vital characteristics of an ethically competent individual that are spelled out by Lewis and Gilman. They argue that ethical competence is embodied in the “mature adult” one who can tolerate ambiguity, uncertainty, and complexity. This is important because this is the context in which most public sector decisions should be made. Lewis and Gilman argue that one must have maturity, a solid sense of self, and a receptive frame of mind to make ethical decisions to operate in these contexts (pg. 32).

Although there is no one definition of ethical competence for the multitude of individuals working in some fashion as public administrators, most definitions outlined in class readings have common threads that can be used to support the following definition. *Ethical competence is a set of skills, behaviors, attitudes that come together alongside that of organizational and systemic policies and procedures which allow individuals to recognize and address ethical dilemmas quickly and fairly.*

One must have the skills to recognize and resolve the countless ethical decisions they make in a given day. Skills involved in ethical competence are developmental and come from ethics training, professional associations, and exposure to ethical situations. One must behave in a way that is ethically sound in a given situation or context. Ethical behaviors come from emulating the behaviors of mentors and exemplary colleagues along with willingness to evaluate and change, if necessary, the way that one
conducts themselves. Attitudes, in the context, can be defined as the way in which a person evaluates a situation or an issue. Ethical attitudes require a person to be self-aware and understand how internal thought processes impact the outcome of one’s behavior and decision making.

There are also levels to ethical competence; individual, organizational, and systemic. A congruent set of principles are necessary across these levels to ensure ethical competence in the public sector. Individual levels of ethical competence are related to how public administrators work to enhance their skills, behaviors, and attitudes to improve their ethical competence and decision making skills. Organizational ethical competence relates to what policies, procedures, enforcements, and evaluations organizations establish to support employees in ethical decision making and to reinforce ethical competence in programs and services. Systemic ethical competence is characterized by how systems ensure that laws, regulations, and codes are in place to set ethical standards of practice and create infrastructures that can educate and enforce ethical and equitable standards across the public sector.

It is difficult for an individual operating as a public sector administrator to truly be ethically competent without this “web” of supports in place. This is because ethical dilemmas are complex and have ripple effects. Plant suggests that this is a recurring theme in the literature as there is often a tension between individual integrity and the barriers that organizations have in place that make it difficult for ethical individuals to achieve high ethical standards (pg. 208). An employee can encounter dozens of barriers in carrying out that ethical decision if this web of supports does not exist. For example, in looking at services for individuals with language barriers, organizations should, at the very least, be complaint with civil rights laws. Civil rights laws require that organizations receiving federal dollars provide language services to LEP service seekers. Therefore, failure to provide language services for LEP individuals constitutes a legal and ethical problem. A Benefits Eligibility Supervisor at a local DSS office may recognize that language services are a legal right for LEP individuals and know that it is the ethical thing to do. But because the organization has not created the account, provided training, developed a policy or given access to staff for interpreters, they are not able to do so.
What constitutes ethical competence for professional public administrators?

Plant defines professional public administrators as professionals with expertise only found in the public sector (pg.195). Because these professionals are only found in government, it stands to reason that common standards for ethical competence would be quickly identified. Yet, this is not the case. The issue is that there are subgroups within the profession and their identity is not that of a professional public administrator. It is the identity of their particular discipline; public educators, law enforcement, public health nurses, etc. This supports the notion that Lewis and Gilman and Plant describe, that without a shared identity, it is difficult to define ethical competence in the public sector.

There are additional components to the definition of ethical competence for public sector professions. These include a general administrative competence as described by Denhardt. These are the ability to understand and apply standards of social or professional behavior; the ability to develop qualities for effective ethical action; and the ability to lead and manage in a manner that raises ethical awareness and competence in the broader organization or context (Plant, pg.192). Other important administrative competence components include; accountability; a commitment to engaging partners in the public process; recognizing the role of advocacy in public service but also awareness of how to balance it with an appreciation of pragmatism; as well as and deep knowledge of complex systems and processes. These are the sets of skills that help public sector professionals understand the tradeoffs and consequences of a particular ethical action.

Ethical competence in the Administration of Human Services

Individuals who work in the administration of human services make decisions that affect the welfare of children, the homeless, the aging, the disabled, the abused, the hungry, and others. The smallest decisions can have profound effects on individuals, colleagues, other systems, and the community at large. It is critical that decisions are made with careful thought and not made by using intuition alone. Additionally decisions are made up and down the organization, not just by one person and many are not evaluated by others for their ethical validity.
Decisions made by front line or midlevel public sector employees often have bigger ethical implications than the clearer cut leadership-level type of non-ethical decisions that garner attention in the press, such as the ongoing scandal in Henrico county where it is said that a school board representative has used her position to influence the purchasing decisions in the county. For example, an administrative assistant who sees that a clinician ends the group session an hour early every night but still bills Medicaid for the standard 3-hour session but doesn’t say anything to managers about it. Or perhaps a procurement officer finds it quicker and easier to use a vendor that they have already been using to transport the elderly instead of opening a new bid process even though the existing vendor wasn’t timely or safe. Or maybe a case manager fails to report the violent ideations of a client because client confidentiality is a core personal value for that clinician and the individual eventually hurts themselves or others.

According to the National Association of Human Service Professionals, human services is a profession developed in response to and in anticipation of the direction of human needs. The profession encompasses a great number of disciplines. There are traditional public sector professionals. There are publically employed professionals (clinicians, social workers, attorneys, etc). There are general public administration professionals who do planning, human resources, budgeting, etc. And there are professionals who deliver public goods and services through contracts or agreements.

This diversity means great challenges for identifying ethical competence in the sector. For example, physicians working in a state mental health facility have their own code of ethics. Social workers in child protective services have codes of ethics and are required to take ethics courses in graduate programs. Attorneys employed in state agencies in employee relations subscribe to the ethical standards of the Bar. However, according to Frederic Reamer, for all of these individuals to be ethically competent, they must have a solid command of three key areas: (1) ethical issues in human service administration; (b) ethical analysis and moral reasoning; and (c) ethical risk management (pg. 231).

**Conclusion**

An overall challenge for the field of public administration is to identify a shared identity that could provide a foundation for a universal code of ethics. It is particularly important for the field to
recognize that even the most basic and routine decisions must be made through the lens of ethical competence. Additionally, it is critical that organizations recognize that individual and organizational ethical competence are interconnected and one cannot happen necessarily exist without the other.

Public human service organizations have an additional responsibility to ensure ethical competence because of the nature of their operations. Issues of multiculturalism, informed consent, confidentiality, the dual relationships employees can have with clients, and service delivery issues require special attention to ethical competence in public human services (Rhodes).

Using the considerations above to create strategies that support the ongoing development of ethical competence in public human services could benefit the workforce, enhance organizational supports, build public trust, and ultimately benefit the end user of human services.

References


