

LEADERSHIP AND ETHICS IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN PUBLIC SECTOR: ETHICAL AND LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES

<https://doi.org/10.47743/jopafl-2024-31-29>

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Abstract: This paper analysis the leadership and ethical challenges facing South African public sector including municipalities. Generally, the South African public sector is grappling with service delivery challenges. On top of the public service crisis discourse there is a huge complain about the ethical challenges facing leadership in all the three spheres of government. The South African government sector has turned into a haven for bad management. This has resulted to unmet service delivery to residents of South Africa. This paper is conceptual in approach, and it contends that despite numerous factors affecting service delivery, one major cause that has been overlooked is the failure of the public sector officials to uphold moral principles when performing public duties in their offices. The paper conclude that the current South African sector requires ethically grounded leaders in order to achieve a stable service delivery system compatible with the South African citizenry and their satisfaction.

Keywords: Corruption, Ethics, Ethical leadership, Leadership, Service delivery, Public sector

Introduction

The South African government established mechanisms for preventing unethical practices within its administrative systems. Various oversight institutions still exist to oversee the implementation and monitoring of ethical compliance and practices in the public sector. The Office of the Public Protector exists mostly to ensure a better public administration and investigate any form of unethical and maladministration of public resources. Thus far we have only witnessed the ineffectiveness of the mechanisms in use by government to combat corruption and maladministration which emanate because of unethical leadership within the government institutions. We long lamented the needs to establish efficient whistleblowing mechanisms to prevent corruption and encouraging public managers to act morally when serving the public. But all in vain, only little or no progress is achieved through the existing mechanisms. The question that needs to be addressed in this paper is: How can ethical leadership within the South African sector be improved or assured? In answering this question, the paper is structured as follows: 1) Conceptualizing leadership and Ethics, 2) The concept of Ethical Leadership, 3) South Africa and the Ethical Background, 4) Ethical Leadership in the South African Public Sector Context, 5) Impact of Unethical Leadership on Service Delivery and 6) Improving Ethical Leadership in the South African public sector.

Conceptualising leadership and ethics

The biggest challenge facing the South African local government and the public sector in general is ethical leadership (Mbandlwa, Dorosamy & Fagbadebo, 2020). Leadership itself as a concept cannot be exercised without some form of moral adherence and commitment. While many scholars are agreeing on the definition of leadership, many argue that the concept is complex (Dike, Odiwe & Ehujor, 2015). Some argues that there are as many definitions of leadership as there are persons who attempted to define the concept (bophoris & Vorria, n.d:1). It can be argued that the concept leadership itself imply ethics. Leadership entails characteristics such as integrity, vision, toughness, decisiveness, trust, commitment, selflessness, creativity, risk taking, communication and visibility (Wajdi, 2017). Of utmost important in the character of a leaders, is integrity, trust, selflessness and commitment which are highly moral characters required of a leader. Leaders are therefore naturally expected to be morally grounded individuals. Leadership cannot be effective, unless the leader displays some moral characteristics. While the concept ethics is a culturally loaded word (Sebola, 2014), the word generally refers to an individual understanding of what is morally or ethically acceptable as wrong or right. According to Nicolaides & Duho (2019), “ethics is generally a collection of principles or standards of expected human conduct that govern the behaviours and guide the decision making of all individuals as well as groupings of people”. Leadership and ethics are essentially two sides of the same coin, the same way as ethics and public service principles are essentially the body and soul of public administration (Nicolaides & Duho, 2019:1715). Leadership is an essential element to improve and uphold honesty and professionalism in the South African local government (Poter, 2009; Schneider, 2009). Therefore, leading without moral consciousness is an indictment to good governance hoped for by the South African government. It is believed that leadership is about achieving collective interests for the entire society (Fagbadebo, 2021).

What is ethical leadership?

Ethical leadership refers to a style of leadership that incorporates moral principles, integrity, and fairness in decision-making and actions (Mihelic, 2010). Ethical leaders are individuals who prioritize the well-being and interests of their followers, while also considering the broader impact on society as a whole (Sabir, 2021). The concept ethical leadership is gaining momentum in both public administration and management literature. Ethical leadership also refers to when business leaders demonstrate appropriate conduct in accordance with recognised principles and values ,both inside and outside of the office (Darby,2023:1). The scholarly interest in ethical leadership is probably influenced by the raging unethical conduct of leadership both politically and administratively within the three spheres of government, the public agencies and the public service as a whole. According to Porter, Webb, Prenzler, and Gill (2015), ethical leaders may convert organisation from a group of people with similar values into an organisation that promotes and inspires value systems, sets standards, reinforces performance, and responds to issues. Ethical leadership is likely to be characterised by elements such as accountability, transparency, honesty, integrity and selflessness. Lack or absence of ethical leadership can adversely affect the delivery of goods and services to the public.

Raga and Taylor (2005) proposed that public officials should be indoctrinated with attitudes and virtues for guiding human conduct since the public sector presented numerous testing situations due to its diversity and that such legislation and the proliferation of ethical codes of conduct would still be unlikely to put unethical behavior to an end (Raga & Taylor, 2005). Government officials are therefore, required to uphold a high degree of professional ethics in discharging their responsibilities. Both the Mandela and the Thabo Mbeki administration never attracted public outcry about unethical public administration (Sebola, 2014). Only the Zuma administration and the Ramaphosa administration have attracted such attention (Sebola, 2023), although Ramaphosa appears to be a man trying to clean it. In South Africa a case in point is that of President Jacob Zuma who served as the President of South Africa from 2009 to 2018. His tenure was marred by numerous allegations of corruption and mismanagement. During his presidency, there were several high-profile corruption scandals, including the controversial arms deal, the Nkandla scandal, and allegations of state capture involving the Gupta family (Shava & Mazenda, 2021). These incidents raised serious questions about ethical governance and accountability in South Africa's public administration.

President Ramaphosa assumed office with a promise to address corruption and improve governance (Shava & Mazenda, 2021). However, progress in holding individuals accountable and bringing about systemic change has been slow and challenging. Neither did he show a good character of an angel through the Phalaphala scandal, which many believe is likely to follow him after his presidential tenure. South Africa's public administration is in a state of difficulty due to prevalence of unethical and corrupt behavior among those holding public office (Dorasamy, 2013). This pandemic hinders government agencies' ability to deliver services to the public effectively and efficiently. Numerous challenges, such as a lack of accountability, openness, and efficiency, characterises the South African public administration (Dorasamy, 2013). Systems for government public procurement have developed into a haven for fraud and corruption in which those protecting government resources get fired, while those misusing it are kept in the system.

South Africa and the ethical background

When compared to the time of apartheid, the ethics and governance frameworks in South Africa's public sector underwent significant changes. During the apartheid era, which lasted from 1948 to 1994, racial segregation and inequality were enforced by a discriminatory and an oppressive system (Nowak, 2005). The government's main priorities during apartheid were to maintain power and uphold laws that encouraged racial discrimination (African Union, 2018). Instead of encouraging openness, accountability, and the interests of the entire population, ethics and governance frameworks were frequently used to advance the objectives of the apartheid regime (African Union, 2018). The government suppressed dissent and opposition, had broad powers, and few checks and balances. However, there was a dramatic change in the ethical and governance structures in the public sector following the end of apartheid and the formation of a democratic government in 1994 (Habib, 1999). The African National Congress (ANC)-led new administration acknowledged the need for a thorough transition to overcome the apartheid legacy and advance democratic ideals, openness, and accountability (Adetiba, 2018).

The stability, peace, and security of the nation are seriously threatened by unethical activity in the public sector in South Africa (Singh, 2022). It may seem the war against corruption

and ethical practices within the South African public service is far from over. If allowed to continue at its rate, there will be no stable government in the future. A number of studies done on this topic recommended that a substantial and effective action is required to get public employees to stop breaking the law and instead handle every situation with honesty and integrity (Stephen, 1999). Public authorities in South Africa have a huge responsibility of dealing and exposing unethical commercial practices within the government system (Stephen, 1999). Masiapata (2007) said that unethical behavior, corrupt practices and lack of accountability have created ethical crisis within the South African public administration. The prevalence of this unethical leadership practices in the public sector results in lack of public trust. In order to maintain public trust, the public administrators need to uphold the law, and ensure prevalence of justice within the communities (Stone, 2004). Currently there is visible lack of trust by communities to public officials and politicians, as the people they serve. Public servants' ethical conduct contributes to building and sustaining that trust. South Africa in its efforts to strengthen national integrity and combat corruption, the country implemented a number of laws and established democratic institutions as important protective barriers (Pillay, 2004). Such include Public Protectors Office, Special Investigation Units, The Hawks and others. However, all these institutions are often vulnerable to being weaponised by ruling elite. There is limitation to the effectiveness of these institutions in guarding against democracy and the prevalence of corruption (Sebola, 2012, Kgobe, 2022).

It may be argued that the widespread of corruption, moral relativism, and moral contextualization of the apartheid regime still plagued the diverse and multicultural society of South Africa (Hilliard & Ferreira, 2001). At some corners of the discussions, South Africans are of opinion that the security system of the whites was in even better in combating crime and corruption, than the current system. Several ethics and governance measures relating to international and national frameworks were adopted to meet the needs of the nation, particularly the public sector (Malunga, 2014). But in vain, they remain ineffectively implemented. Therefore, achieving nothing in return. These measures (policies, legislative and regulatory frameworks) are made up of the important institutions, industries, laws, customs, and particular mechanisms that work together to improve good governance. And yet, they remain fancy policy documents to boast about than, being correctly implemented.

Ethical leadership in the South African public sector

The image of South African public sector and their municipalities are currently ravaged by ethical problems at the leadership level of the organisation. The municipalities were said to be failing to deliver in areas of infrastructure and the basic needs (Ngqwala & Ballard, 2020). Although scholarly literature, specifically focused on corruption and its different forms, but the major factor or a cause of it is lack of ethical leadership by those in position of authority. Senior municipal officials, public officials and politicians are mostly the one listed in unscrupulous procurement processes. Unethical leadership is responsible for a number of community protests in the country. Numerous municipality residents have taken to the streets complaints about corruption which resulted into lack of services in housing, health, infrastructure and electricity (Bonga, 2021). Although numerous studies were previously done to determine the effects of corruption and leadership on governance (Naidoo, 2012), the scourge of corruption continue, while the leadership of municipalities

and the South African public sector continue under the guise of unethical leaders and managers. Even though ethics has received a lot of research, ethical leadership has received a lot less focus. As a result, a number of African nations have seen widespread corruption and mismanagement of public resources. In this paper, we argue that leadership is mostly responsible for such behavior. Speaking to attendees at the Serious Social Investing Conference 2016 in South Africa, Chief Justice Mogoeng Mogoeng stressed the necessity for appointment and nomination of moral leaders who are free from corruption (Nicolaides, 2016). This opinion was mostly ascribed to South Africa's resounding constitutional decision. South Africa regularly experiences leadership crisis in a number of its agencies (Nicolaides, 2016). The crisis at Eskom, Transnet, and other government agency organisations is sufficient evidence. There is currently no significant satisfactory service offered to the majority of the citizens. Corruption has had a detrimental impact on the country's economy and has hindered social development (Dorasamy, 2013), and the root cause of it remain unknown and uncontrolled as those practicing it claim to be uprooting it. African political leaders continue to display arrogance and deceptive liars who fails to implement constitutional provisions they have signed an oath for (Sebola, 2014). Ethical and moral consciousnesses by public officials, municipal officials and politicians at all levels have become a pretentious act. It can be argued that a government which is ethically conscious is highly unlikely to be captured by corrupt individuals through bribes or other unlawful favours.

Numerous cases of unethical conduct received publicity through both mass and print media. The high level of unethical behavior involves both politicians and the senior government officials (Cheteni & Shindika, 2017). Former Mineral Resources Minister Mosebenzi Zwane was charged for fraud and corruption. Charges related to the R280-million worth of a project (Corruption Watch, 2022). Ace Magashule, a Senior ANC politician was suspended as Secretary-General of the African National Congress in 2021 after he was charged with multiple counts of corruption, money laundering and fraud. Khomotso Phahlane, a Former top cop and Crime Intelligence general was nailed in R54m corruption scandal. The National Police Commissioner Khehla Sithole confirmed that Two Hundred and fifty Police officers were arrested in connection with hundred and seventy-eight (178) corruption cases as part of a "Clean-up Operation". Ironically, most corruption cases involves senior public officials who were supposed to protect, maintain and enforce law. The number of reported cases against the South African top officials including the law enforcement officers clearly indicate the level of unethical behavior of the individual entrusted with monitoring and maintenance of the law.

The impact of unethical leadership on quality of service delivery

Unethical leadership contribute negatively to the quality of services delivery. Cases of favouritism and nepotism are a major concern. According to Hanekom, Rowland and Bain (1995), nepotism includes the practice of elevating friends or family members into senior public positions without taking their qualifications into account. Nepotism disregards the principle of fairness because unqualified candidates are hired for positions just because they know the right person in the hierarchy of the organisation and that disregards the principle of fairness (Hanekom, Rowland & Bain, 1995). Due to some employed officials' inability to do their jobs well, nepotism and favoritism have an impact on the level of service delivery. (Hanekom, Rowland & Bain, 1995). Due to some employed officials'

inability to do their jobs well, nepotism and favoritism have an impact on the level of service delivery.

Secondly, unethical practices led to misuse of resources and corruption. Numerous government departments as well as their Local government were seen with high level of maladministration (Matsiliza, 2013). Some funds are inappropriately allocated to projects which does not exist (Cameron, 2003). Residents of South Africa has also taken their complaints to the streets and confront both local and provincial government on the poor level of service delivery (Akinboade, Mokwena & Kinfack, 2014). The reality of the public sector today is that, in contrast to the past, it is currently judged on how effectively it delivers services to the public. Today's citizens have higher expectations of service levels because they are more aware of their rights, have better access to information about public services. Powerful government officials frequently divert funds away from development initiatives which ultimately results in poverty, underdevelopment, and inequality. Unethical leadership has been widely acknowledged as a barrier to effective societal development. Lack of such control led to growth in corruption in which public officials ignore effective internal controls and create moral decay. Maladministration and poor service in public administration has reached unprecedented levels, leading to inefficiencies in the bureaucracy.

There is a greater need than ever for transparency and accountability to help citizens understand how public funds are managed and spent, how decisions are made and why they are made, and the data and information used to support those decisions (International Federation of Accountants, 2022). Accountability and transparency are the corner stone of democracy and successful government. When leaders are unethical, they often evade accountability for their actions, and they act above the constitutional supremacy. This sets a poor example for the rest of the public administration organisational structure and creates a culture where responsibility is not valued (Juarez-Garcia, 2020). Without accountability, there is little motivation to improve quality service or address issues of national importance that arise. Lack of accountability is becoming synonymous with South African public sector and their municipalities. There is too much administrative failures and regression in the supply chain management processes (Shava & Mazenda, 2021).

Improving ethical leadership in the south african public sector

For the public sector to improve, ethical leadership, which is linked to effective leadership and good governance, is typically a requirement. Controlling unethical behaviors, such as corruption and bad governance, is becoming more and more necessary (Whitton, 2001). Public sector executives must conduct themselves in a way that best benefits the public office. Citizens put their faith in those chosen to represent them, but if those chosen act dishonestly and unethically, the public begin to lose trust in them (Mhlauli, 2020).

South Africans no longer have faith or confidence in those in charge of the public sector because of the inappropriate manner that the leaders conduct themselves. This is one of the most concerning and destructive acts to good public administration system. It is not disputable that corruption is a cancerous symptom that hurts the nation's economic development (Van Wyk-Khosa & Mpani, 2023). It violates democratic principles as enshrined in our constitution and has a detrimental effect on providing services to the general public at large (Van Wyk-Khosa & Mpani, 2023). It is against the principles of good governance and economic growth and the public scarce resources are directed to

specific pockets, which threatens the social, economic, and human development (Mhlauli, 2022). People lose faith in government when they do not receive what is rightfully theirs due to corruption (Indgreen, 2004). Investors will not want to invest in a country where corruption is prevalent, and governance systems are compromised (Mhlauli, 2022). Additionally, it is important to realise that corruption affects not only the public sector but also the private sector and other industries.

The purpose of conformity to ethics in public administration is to control the irrational behavior of civil servants, to promote a sense of administrative responsibility and to develop and advance good will towards the government among the populace (Fejzullahu & Batalli, 2019). Over the last few years, South Africa has been at the top of the ladder regarding unethical behaviour which involves top public officials. Without rules and regulations that direct their moral worth, public officials cannot act as agents of their respective states. Without morals, principles and values, there will be no meaning to the purpose of public administration (Singo, 2018). Ethical behavior in the public sector is very important because the state has the authority to seek obedience from individuals and oblige them to act in certain ways (Meguid, 2011). Thus, obligations not only need to emanate from a public official's responsibility for the administration, but they must also come from legal obligations which, for all public employees, must be primary consideration (Meguid, 2011).

According to Esau (2019), "panelists should start asking applicants for jobs across the board about ethical challenges they have faced in the past and how they handled them in order to assess their ethical competence". Political consideration in the appointment of officials should not be at the expense of effective public administration. The security and ethical checks should not only be required in the security and intelligence agencies only, but the methods should also strictly be applied in the public sector appointments. This will help to determine the ethical characteristics that the candidate possess. Buyer (2021) mentioned that "ethical principles like beneficence, nonmaleficence, veracity, justice, fidelity, and equality should be used by public sector leaders". The principle of moral responsibility is embedded in acting in the best interest of others. Beneficence demonstrates the public officials' obligation to promote the citizens' welfare (Beauchamp, 2008). Additionally, Buye (2021) described "authentic leadership as a new distinct leadership type with positive traits based on ethical standards and principles". Haq (2011), also revealed the need for a range of abilities that moral leadership should display, such as social, technical, conceptual, interpersonal and emotional intelligence. Leaders are likely to be transparent and accountable if they are becoming receptive and effective. The executive's emotional intelligence keeps them from making unethical, and emotionally biased decisions. Crews (2015) further emphasized, integrity, and role modeling as a good requirement for the public sector leadership. Brown and Trevino (2006) revealed what they called the "moral manager" dimension as significant for public sector leadership to achieve public service delivery. Although the concepts of transformational, spiritual, and authentic leadership all included a moral component, ethical leadership had a unique application to this moral dimension.

Conclusion

This paper engaged on one of the most critical areas of public administration (leadership), which though critical but is receiving less attention and creative solution. Although

unethical leadership is reported by both print and mass media across the globe, a solution to it remain unresolved mainly because this problem affects both politician and senior government officials, who are supposed to uphold the moral standards. Corrective actions are rarely taken to resolve such abnormalities, in the sector, unless meant to achieve punitive political non allegiance. While unethical leadership in the South African public sector remain a problem, a solution might not be achieved unless those in political leadership and senior positions of government are made to face the might of the law. The punitive Constitutional application cannot be to a select few, but to all who should uphold it.

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