This work examines attitudes about ethics in American government during the turbulent time from the end of the past century to the beginning of the new. Using data from a national survey, the authors explore views toward ethics in society and integrity in public agencies, with an emphasis on the code of ethics of the American Society for Public Administration. The results not only reveal considerable continuity over the years but also suggest that individual managers are increasingly empowered, that agencies are affecting positive change, and that the ASPA code may be influencing management practices. The implications of the findings for ASPA ethics initiatives are considered.

The tumultuous years spanning the end of the past century and the beginning of the new were marked by a succession of momentous episodes in American life—the impeachment of a president, a contested presidential election, terrorist attacks, massive corporate corruption, the transformation of record budget surpluses into record deficits, the Columbia space shuttle tragedy, a preemptive war in Iraq, the extraordinary rendition and “alternative” interrogation of suspected terrorists, war profiteering, Hurricane Katrina, controversial wiretapping and surveillance programs, and secret CIA prisons, in addition to campaign finance, lobbying, influence-peddling, and sex scandals.

These events occurred against a backdrop of growing energy costs, a widening gap between the rich and poor, continued workforce downsizing, and increasing privatization of public functions. Looming Medicare and Social Security crises in domestic politics, and North Korean and Iranian threats in foreign affairs, also characterized recent times. Various public management reform movements sought to augment the capacity of government to address contemporary challenges but produced discordant results (Bowman and West 2007; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004; Suleiman 2003). Opportunities to boost confidence in business and government—the economic boom of the late 1990s, the tragedy of September 11, the stabilization of Afghanistan or Iraq—have been abused by corporate CEOs and politicians through self-destructive avarice and hubris, squandering American honor (Mallaby 2006). Yet the African proverb “No matter how long and dark the night, the day is sure to come” is an apt reminder that change is inevitable.

In light of the startling events of the last 10 years, it is a propitious time to gauge the attitudes of public managers toward ethics in government. Ethics is fundamental to the quality of democracy and its administration, as the recent expansion of relevant literature attests. Indeed, the study and practice of American public administration has never been merely a technical endeavor because ethics is at its soul (Frederickson 1997). Any issue may be more important than ethics, according to Dennis Thompson’s (1992) famous paradox, but ethics is more important than any issue. Because ethics provides the preconditions for the making of good public policy, all policies depend on it.

The purpose of this study is to explore the ethical concerns of administrators about society and government in general, as well as organizational and behavioral standards in particular. To investigate this subject, a questionnaire (consisting of agree/disagree statements as well as several multiple choice and open-ended items) and follow-ups were mailed, along with a copy of the code of ethics of the American Society for Public Administration (ASPA), in the winter of 2006–07 to a random sample of 750 practitioner members. This is the third such project conducted by the senior author and his colleagues since 1989 (Bowman 1990; Bowman and Williams 1997; see also Bowman 1977). As a replication, it uses the same...
methodology, data analysis procedures, and data presentation format employed previously; when survey questions were replicated, most often between 1996 and 2006, comparisons are made here.3

Usable replies were received from 49 percent of those contacted, a respectable response rate, albeit somewhat less than the earlier research.4 While the data are limited to employee perspectives, this design is appropriate because the objective is to discover personal perceptions of governmental ethics. The respondent profile matches the ASPA practitioner membership, a group that is predominately white, male, well-educated, experienced in local government, in middle or senior-level management, relatively high in income, and moderate to liberal in political philosophy and holds at least a six-year membership in the organization.5 The findings briefly consider ethics in society and government and the nature of integrity in public agencies and then focus on ASPA’s code. The implications of the data, and the role that a professional organization can play to enhance principled behavior, are then discussed. The results reveal not only considerable continuity over the years but also increased ethical concern and sophistication on the part of public administrators.

Ethics in Society
Several questions probed perceptions of ethical concerns in the nation. The results, which closely parallel the two earlier studies, indicate that administrators do not believe contemporary interest in morality is a fleeting matter. A large majority (83 percent) rejected the claim that “the current concern of American society with ethics in government is a passing fad” (11 percent agreed; the balance were undecided). Nearly two-thirds (64 percent), in fact, thought that this interest “seems to be steadily growing over time” (21 percent disagreed; the remainder were uncertain).

Is this attention merely rhetorical in nature? Most (70 percent) disagreed that “ethics is similar to the weather: everyone talks about it, but no one does anything about it” (19 percent concurred; the rest were undecided), in contrast with 62 percent who dissented in 1996 and 48 percent who disagreed in 1989. An increased readiness to consider moral issues and a corresponding decline in cynicism are apparent.

This willingness may derive from an impatience with—and the relative unimportance of—headline scandals. Some two-thirds of the sample agreed that “incidents of outright criminality in government distract attention from more subtle, genuine ethical dilemmas” in daily management (such as the cases discussed in a subsequent section), although nearly three-fourths agreed in 1996 and 1989, a change that could reflect the frequency of recent highly publicized investigations and convictions. Most respondents in each survey year, though, saw a heightened interest in public virtue but (unlike those in the late 1980s) thought that something would come of it. Indeed, despite—or perhaps because of—exposés, the salience of ethics may be a result of disappointment with, and a need to renew, the quality of democratic life.

As part of such an effort, there is hesitancy about following the example set by the private sector. In fact, comparable percentages of administrators in all three periods (88 percent in 2006, 85 percent in 1996, 86 percent in 1989) rejected the claim that “government morality in America is lower than business morality.” While a simple majority (51 percent) was not ready to concede that “recent civil service reforms that encourage the use of market principles have the effect of making government an agent of corporate interests instead of the public interest” (24 percent concurred, with the rest undecided), 48 percent agreed with another 2006-only statement that “the blurring of boundaries between the public and private sectors has had the effect of subjugating civic values to commercial values” (30 percent disagreed, with the balance undecided).

Overall, then, while some of these views may be self-serving, corporate enterprise is not seen as a standard in conducting the public’s business—a matter of some concern in a time of contracting out, privatization, entrepreneurialism, and “run-government-like-a-business” civil service reforms. With these data in hand, what can be said about moral behavior in the conduct of everyday management?

Integrity in Agencies
There is no false sense that public organizations are immune from ethical issues. When asked to react to this statement, “All people, especially managers, encounter ethical dilemmas at work,” virtually every administrator (97 percent), as in 1989 and 1996, agreed that this is true, a finding that is consistent with earlier work on employee observance of fraud, waste, and abuse (MSPB 1993). Ethical matters clearly are pervasive in the workaday life of government. Indeed, when asked a multiple-choice question in 2006 whether “recent civil service reforms around the nation, which generally tend to increase managerial flexibility and decrease employee protections,” affect the frequency of ethical problems, 30 percent indicated an increase, 6 percent a decrease, and 43 percent said neither (19 percent had no opinion).

Most respondents (75 percent in 2006, 76 percent in 1996, 67 percent in 1989) believed that ethical concern can be empowering in organizations (just 7 percent said no in 2006, with the balance uncertain). In fact, nearly three-fourths of the managers (60 percent in 1996, 65 percent in 1989) rejected the claim that “expressions of ethical concern … evoke cynicism,
self-righteousness, paranoia, and/or laughter.” Similarly, some 75 percent (60 percent in 1996, 57 percent in 1989) disputed the assertion that ethics is “meaningless because organizational cultures encourage a Machiavellian philosophy of power, survival, and expediency (16 percent concurred; 7 percent were undecided). A substantial plurality (46 percent) rejected the 2006 statement that “the current cost to one’s career is blowing the whistle on fraud, waste, and abuse is greater today than it was 10 years ago,” while just 29 percent agreed (the balance were uncertain or had no opinion). In short, despite the decline of civil discourse in the public square and the rise of hyperpartisanship, more administrators are comfortable raising these issues at work than was the case earlier.

Through the years, in fact, a shrinking population of practitioners (50 percent in 1989, 46 percent in 1996, 35 percent in 2006) has agreed that supervisors are under pressure to compromise personal standards. The origin of this stress, however, remains at the top levels of the department. Roughly six of 10 respondents (58 percent in 2006 compared to 55 percent in 1996 and 60 percent 1989) doubted that “ethical standards of elected and appointed officials are as high as those held by career civil servants” (just 26 percent agreed in 2006; the rest were uncertain).

In addition, almost 90 percent disputed the statement that “senior management has a stronger set of ethical standards than I do” (90 percent in 1996 as opposed to 75 percent in 1989). A core issue is “the proliferation of political appointees and the politicization of upper-grade career managers,” according to a federal middle manager in the nation’s capital in the latest survey.

In summary, these administrators confront dilemmas, increasingly believe that ethics can be enabling in organizations, overcome social taboos about discussing ethics, and perceive tension between top executives and career administrators. What strategies do agencies take to create an ethical culture? To examine this question, institutional policies and leadership behaviors are considered next.

Moral Standards in Organizational Conduct

Organizational Approaches

Individual actions clearly can be affected by an agency’s written policies and unwritten expectations; indeed, many decisions in government must supersede individual preferences. Not surprisingly, then, almost one-half (49 percent) of the respondents agreed that “organizations define and control the situations in which decisions are made” (25 percent disagreed; 11 percent were undecided).

Compared to the earlier polls (when 65 percent agreed in 1996 and more than 75 percent agreed in 1989), it appears there is a growing emphasis on individual responsibility.

Managers were asked to characterize institutional approaches toward ethics (table 1). In each of the three periods, a little over one-fifth of the respondents believed that agencies have a reactive, negative, primitive, “low road” approach to ethics, a strategy that...
reinforces popular suspicions and focuses on wrongdoing. Fewer administrators over time (64 percent in 1989, 58 percent in 1996, 52 percent in 2006) indicated that most departments employ no consistent approach. A “high road,” affirmative strategy—one that encourages ethical behavior and deters rather than simply detects problems—described 20 percent of organizations in the most recent survey (versus 11 percent in 1996 and a mere 7 percent in 1989).

If a cardinal responsibility of leadership is to develop moral awareness in organizations, instill them with noble purpose, and act as a steward of the system, then some headway is being made—although there is considerable room for improvement.

When comparing responses between 2006 and 1996 on ethics training, a smaller number of managers indicated that their organization has never provided formal ethics training (29 percent of managers versus 54 percent in 1996). Furthermore, in 2006, one-third said that it is offered on a continuing basis (only 17 percent said so in 1996). Clearly, there has been an expansion of training opportunities during the last 10 years, although 25 percent (compared to 22 percent earlier) stated that training is offered at least once after hiring, and 5 percent (compared 6 percent before) said upon hiring only. More than 80 percent of the sample believed that such courses can be efficacious, as they endorsed the 2006 statement that “formal ethics training would improve compliance with ethical standards” (7 percent disagreed and 10 percent were uncertain).

Is there an internal or external organizational structure to support agency ethics activities? In 2006, 41 percent said that their department lacks “an internal ethics oversight office or a person directly responsible for dealing with ethical concerns,” a substantial change from the 58 percent in 1996 who did not have such a resource. Regarding external support, in 2006, 48 percent (versus 52 percent in 1996) stated that their organization does not come “under the jurisdiction of an external governmental ethics commission or agency.”

Overall, training sessions, a department-level office, and perhaps external commission are more available now than was the case earlier. In fact, 60 percent said that “there is an on-going effort to reinforce an ethics code in my agency” (22 percent disagreed; the balance were undecided) compared to just 38 percent who agreed in 1996. No doubt leadership behaviors beyond formal agency resources (the next topic) are an important part of this change.

Organizational Leadership

As discussed, both modest and significant progress has occurred in organizational strategy, training availability, and agency support. Yet the data in table 1 also suggest that in many offices, there is no agreed-upon, usable standard or procedure to assist employees; apparently they either neglect, shift responsibility, or simply have no approach for dealing with ethical problems, as illustrated by these observations:

We have a senior manager who has made a number of unethical and possibly illegal decisions. The leadership team refuses to do anything because no one wants to cause anybody any "discomfort." Informal and formal complaints have been ignored. Even the press, the Inspector General, and the Government Accountability Office have walked away.

—Experienced federal professional-technical official in Washington, DC

I was directed by upper management to “black-list” 23 job candidates. I took it all the way to the city manager, who said he didn’t condone this but then allowed it to happen.

—Local government supervisor in Arizona

A committee of upper-level career managers openly decided to sole source pending contracts—contrary to procurement competition rules. No senior manager challenged that even though they knew better: “the silence of the suck-up politicized career manager.”

—Federal middle manager in Washington, DC

A passive, unarticulated, inchoate, or reactive institutional philosophy is not likely, in short, to benefit those seeking to resolve moral conundrums.

Accordingly, study participants in 1996 and 2006 were asked what techniques work best (and least) in fostering ethics and deterring ethical lapses in their own agencies (approximately 70 percent replied in both years). Replies to these free-response questions were diverse, overlapping, and not readily quantifiable. The significance of management by example (i.e., the demonstration of desired conduct by agency heads and elected officials), however, cannot be overstated. “Modeling the way” is key, in the view of one California local government executive. A senior executive from a Mid-Atlantic state government pointed out that “ethical behavior [enables] employees to see ethical action being taken; this becomes the organizational culture.”

Utilizing a “mission first” approach, ethical expectations can be incorporated into written policies and the annual strategic plan, according to a Washington, DC, federal middle manager, a Virginia local
executive, and a top state government official in Kansas. “A structured business process approach to ethics at the executive level, with specific roles and responsibilities across the entire department,” according to a high-level Florida state government official (and echoed by a local-level California middle manager), demonstrates that ethics is a clearly understood priority. Good leadership, said a local mid-level official from Virginia, promotes a strong sense of responsibility. To nurture worthy conduct, “talk about it, support it, and enforce it,” an Arizona local government executive wrote without further elaboration.

By interpolation, talking about ethics likely means an ongoing dialogue (an Oregon local executive and a top Maine state official reported) to encourage people to think about these issues, both in peer group discussions (a middle manager in Florida local government) and weekly staff meetings, where ethics is a common theme (a federal professional/technical official). What works is “open discussions of complex decisions” (a Virginia local-level executive; a colleague in Kentucky concurred), as well as a management habit of asking out loud, “What is the right thing to do?” and “always inquiring if there are any ethical concerns prior to working on an issue” (a North Carolina city official).

Neglect of ethical concerns includes the following:

- “Remaining silent and saying ‘don’t worry about it,’” behaviors that may result in depending upon “peer pressure to do the most expedient thing” (a federal professional in Washington state, an Arizona state government middle manager). “Our ethical technique is ‘don’t get caught’ breaking the law or embarrassing the governor” (a Florida state executive).
- “We were asked to look ‘the other way’ on an HR case that involved immigration policies” (a Washington, DC federal supervisor).
- Maintaining “a reactive approach that only responds to specific cases as they occur” (a Florida local-level official).
- Simply “not having a set of core values for the organization” (a Washington, DC, federal supervisor).

Respondents also reported an indifferent, perfunctory approach that includes e-mails from headquarters, classes with little application to the job, one-way online training absent senior leadership, and treating ethics as just “another orientation brochure” or “just one more box to check.” Heavy-handed rules and regulations, and dictates from above (with harsh penalties)—especially top-down pronouncements on how personnel (but not necessarily executives) should act—work least. The threatening nature of such a strategy is exacerbated by at-will employment practices, denigration of public service principles, and “stressing ethics to the point of insult,” views expressed by a North Carolina professional-technical person, a Texas state government supervisor, and an Arizona local executive, respectively.

Finally, talking about and supporting ethics should be followed by enforcement commensurate with the problem. A Nevada local-level executive recom-
enforcing ethics. Yet role modeling cannot be the only influence on ethical behavior. While it is apparent that some progress has been made in organizational strategies and leadership behavior, much developmental work remains.

**Codes of Ethics and the ASPA Case**

The literature demonstrates that private and public sector leaders regard codes of conduct as a viable method to communicate organizational norms, possibly because they are seen as an important component of professionalism (e.g., Svara 2007, chap. 5). In fact, when asked in a 2006-only statement whether “a code of ethics is an essential part of my professional identity,” 86 percent of the sample responded affirmatively. In results comparable to the earlier surveys, just 4 percent of the respondents were satisfied that “there is no real need for codes of ethics in work organizations” (more than 90 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed). There is little dispute, then, that codes can address an authentic need.

Not only are they regarded as significant, but also there is less doubt today about their actual effect than before. One-half (53 percent) found a difference between agencies that have codes and those that do not. This contrasts with 44 percent in 1996 and 38 percent in 1989 (approximately 20 percent in the three studies did not believe that a difference exists, although the undecided proportion has declined). Once again, there is evidence of progress in perceptions of positive ethical practices.

How can professional associations, notably those with an interdisciplinary scope, promote ethics? In response to this challenge, ASPA’s original code of ethics was adopted in 1984 and subsequently revised in 1994 (Van Wart 1996). Study participants were asked, “Are you familiar with the ASPA code of ethics?”

In 2006, 83 percent of members claimed familiarity with the code of ethics, contrasted with 79 percent in 1996 and 58 percent in 1989. Moreover, among those answering affirmatively, only 14 percent admitted “I have heard of it” (compared with 21 percent in 1996 and 34 percent in 1989), although 55 percent said they had “a general familiarity” (65 percent in 1996, 56 percent in 1989), and just 14 percent reported they were “quite familiar” with the code (contrasted with 14 percent and 10 percent previously).

These findings show that overall awareness of the ASPA credo has steadily increased, perhaps as a result of the 1994 revision process, its frequent publication in *Public Administration Review*, code-related stories in *PA Times*, the establishment of the ASPA Section on Ethics, and publication of its newsletter and journal. As discussed later, and coupled with findings shown elsewhere, the code may influence daily management.

Code familiarity is enhanced by its durability and inclusiveness, as nearly 90 percent rejected the 2006 statement that “the transition from the ‘old public service’ (service delivery by governmental, centralized, hierarchical authority structures) to the ‘new public service’ (service delivery by multisectoral, decentralized, horizontal network structures) renders the code obsolete” (2 percent agreed; 9 percent were undecided). In addition, it “satisfactorily addresses belief system differences between younger and older generations of public employees,” according to a near majority (48 percent), although 38 percent were uncertain and 11 percent disagreed in response to this 2006 item.

**Acceptability and Enforceability**

Several criteria—acceptability and enforceability—can be used to ascertain the effectiveness of a code. That is, not only should those governed by the standard endorse (or at least acquiesce to) its principles, but also the policy must have an enforcement mechanism. Some 86 percent of the managers indicated that the ASPA code “mirrors my own ethical standards” (3.1 percent disagreed, with the balance uncertain) in reply to a 2006-only question. Most respondents affirmed that the code “provides an appropriate set of standards” to guide administrators (90 percent agreed in both 2006 and 1996, 70 percent in 1989). There is, however, acknowledgment that more customized policies are needed for individual workplaces. Some two-thirds of participants in the three surveys suggested that in order for the ASPA statement to be effective, it “must be supplemented by an agency-specific code” (a finding, examined later, that bears on the functions of the society). The test of acceptability is, of course, whether or not the code’s ideals are actually practiced. Most managers in 2006 and 1996 reported that they “often” (62 percent and 65 percent, respectively, versus 38 percent in 1989) or “occasionally” (23 percent and 20 percent, respectively, versus 34 percent in 1989) use the standard or its principles at work.

A survey essay question offers some depth to this finding, as administrators were asked to describe an ethical dilemma in their office and whether or not the code helped them. Those responding (35 percent of the total) were divided over its utility, as approximately one-half found it helpful and one-half did not (also true in 1996). Among the former, written comments focused on the code’s value as a touchstone for handling relationships with vendors, interpreting the public interest, dealing with conflicts of interest, disclosing privileged information, encouraging citizen participation, addressing personnel issues, and coping with improper influences by elected officials on decision making. Among the latter comments, managers stated that other standards are used, that the ASPA credo contains incompatible provisions, that the code
does not deal with specific issues, and that it is not applicable because the respondent has no authority to resolve the problem.

In brief, most of the entire sample either often or occasionally uses the code on the job; this can go beyond inspirational and educational purposes to application in policy making. At that point, though, its efficacy is called into question (for the reasons indicated) by one-half of those managers who responded to the essay item. More intriguing results are found in the responses to the query, “With what frequency is the ASPA code and/or its principles used by your agency in daily management?” In 2006, nearly two-thirds (65 percent) stated that it is used “fairly often,” with another one-fifth (20 percent) saying “occasionally,” 7 percent “seldom,” and 5 percent “never” (these data are very comparable to those from 1996, when the item first appeared).

Despite these encouraging findings, 50 percent of the respondents said that “the role of ‘umbrella’ professional associations such as ASPA in affecting the ethical behavior of its members—to say nothing of government as a whole—is very limited” (39 percent disagreed; the rest were undecided), a finding similar to 1996. Possibly these respondents are being “realistic”: while the credo can be helpful in reflecting on issues, actual behavior may be governed by department regulations. Or perhaps the apparent inconsistency, as noted in the 1997 article, is an example of “thinking globally, acting locally”—only so much can be done by a voluntary association, but initiatives can be taken at specific locations (Bowman and Williams 1997, 521). It could also be a variant of the well-known finding in ethics research (e.g., Baumhart 1961) that people generally assume they are more ethical than others—that is, ASPA probably cannot help someone else (them), but it can reinforce the high standards in one’s own agency (us). Alternatively, it could be that the question was narrowly read as dealing with enforcement. In any event, more than 90 percent agreed in 2006 and 1996 that in order for the code to be given weight, it must first be taken seriously by top management—apparently something that is now taking place in a number of agencies.

In summary, these practitioners have a substantial acquaintance with the ASPA code. Not only that, they, and many of their agencies, also use it in daily management. If one standard of an effective document is acceptability, then ASPA’s canon has met that criterion. Indeed, since the publication of the 1996 data indicating considerable support for the statement, “I fully support and will abide by ASPA’s code of ethics” (with a signature line), the association’s membership application and annual renewal forms now contain that declaration. Regarding enforceability, the other criterion, more than 80 percent of respondents recognized the features that a code should contain, such as congruence with employee values and confidential reporting mechanisms. Indeed, 84 percent of the managers agreed that “any code worth having is worth enforcing” (versus 55 percent in 1996). However, considerably fewer respondents (52 percent) endorsed sanctions for noncompliance, and little support for granting compliance power was found when that question was last asked in 1996.10

Given the widespread support for the ASPA code among these practitioners, it is evident that they seek to encourage human impulses for ethical thought and action. Enforcement and sanctions emphasize avoidance of untoward behavior—something already more than adequately covered in law—and, as such, fit well with the antigovernment climate. Not surprisingly, nearly 90 percent rejected the 2006 contention that “ethics laws make government ethical.” What is needed instead, the managers seem to say, is not more punitive minimalist ethics and the despair it can cause.

Arguably more an aspirational code of ethics than a compliance code of conduct, the ASPA doctrine attempts to reinforce the legitimacy of public administration, articulate government service as a public trust, and take managerial discretion seriously. Ethics codes promote more than simple compliance; they foster the use of judgment and recognition of responsibility for decisions rendered—the real work of ethics. Acknowledging the ambiguities and complexities of public service, ethics codes offer interpretative frameworks to clarify dilemmas, encourage a philosophy of excellence, and abet individual accountability. The ASPA statement, in brief, “provides positive moral authority. It clearly indicates the significance of the principles that it embodies. As such, the point is precisely not to administer discipline” (Bowman and Williams 1997, 522). An overwhelming majority of these managers, in fact, concurred that the code—as now written—is relevant and use its tenets.

Because ethical dilemmas—both in appearance and in reality—are part of being a public servant, this section on the utility of the ASPA code concludes with two cases. Consider the hypothetical but realistic scenarios shown in tables 2 and 3, one dealing with downsizing (from the 1996 study) and one with selecting a job.
Bob heard from his manager that his organization's staff will be downsizing; it could be as little as 5 percent or as much as 30 percent. However, the supervisor told Bob that “we’re all under strict orders to keep it quiet” so that the agency's best employees will not seek other jobs. Ron (one of the finest professionals in Bob’s unit), upon hearing the downsizing rumors, told Bob that he was sure that he could get another job at a new business if a reduction in force occurred. However, their openings would close soon. Ron asked Bob, “Will there be layoffs?” and “Should I get another job now?” Does the ASPA code assist you in thinking about this problem?

In both years, comparable percentages of managers responded to the case and indicated whether or not the code was useful. Most explained their decision by commenting on how it either helped or did not help them consider the broad issues raised or justify their solution to the case.

**Code as helpful.** For like-minded administrators, the code was seen as a beneficial way to think about the problem, to consider the conflicting responsibilities of the employee and the employer, and to recall that ethical decision making requires weighing principles. The association's statement provides a starting point, “a foundation for the work we do” (a California local government executive), and a useful guideline to highlight that “in the end, the decision comes down to one’s values” (a Florida local jurisdiction middle manager). “When difficult decisions are faced,” wrote a New York state professional-technical official, “strong code of ethics can help build a framework around the problem and/or stimulate questions relevant to the issue.”

The case, in other words, provides not only a test of the code's utility but also a test of one’s beliefs. It can assist in reflecting on the problem and, in so doing, the code's guidance (combined with personal beliefs) can help to actually resolve it. “Bob can use the code,” said a federal professional-technical employee, “to help him balance competing demands and decide what to do.”

For some, the employee should be told nothing because the code requires that confidential information be respected and protected. A federal supervisor pointed out that “no decision has been made and, therefore, no definite answer should be given to any employee, and any answers should go to all employees at the same time.” “A manager,” opined a Tennessee state mid-level official, “has to be loyal and up and down the chain of command.” A Kentucky state executive indicated, “We all have an obligation to follow orders. Bob has no idea what will happen. All he can do by telling Ron is to spread rumors and disobey his boss.” A top official in California state government said, “Demonstrate the highest personal integrity—if the boss said not to tell anyone, you do not tell anyone.” “Bob’s manager acted unethically in revealing confidential information,” a Washington state executive stated. “If Bob passed it along to Ron, then he’s unethical as well.” A senior Nevada local official wrote, “It would seem that the code under section IV (‘Promote Ethical Organizations’) would require Bob tell Ron. But this is a business decision that’s still in the planning stage; the facts are not complete or firm yet. It would be unfair to tell and a breach of confidentiality to tell Ron.”

In brief, for these officials (about one-eighth of those who tackled the case), the appropriate approach was that Bob is not at liberty to discuss the situation.

For others (some 23 percent), the answer to the dilemma was also clear: The employee must be told. “Demonstrating personal integrity must include being honest about policy decisions that affect the lives of employees; security in this case is hurtful,” according to a supervisor in Texas state government. A federal middle manager in Wisconsin noted that “leadership has a responsibility to be open, and to involve employees in planning and implementation of such actions.” Referring to the code, “I think that both personal integrity and promoting ethical organizations apply,” a Nevada local-level professional-technical employee wrote. He continued, “You want what’s best for your organization as well as your employee, and you want to be truthful and honest. My interpretation is that you should give Bob complete information. Let him make the decision.” A local jurisdiction executive in Colorado believed that “government does a poor job in handling RIFs [reductions in force]. In a human versus bureaucratic response, I would encourage this employee to consider other options.” A Nevada local government executive said, “An agency has an obligation to be fair and open with every employee regarding their employment status.” Citing section III, part 4 of the code (respect superiors, subordinates, colleagues, and the public), a top-level Arkansas state official stated that he “would inform my manager that keeping such information form employees would be unethical, and I would refuse to do so.” A middle manager in a Colorado local jurisdiction had a similar view, adding, “this isn’t an organization that I would work for.” These administrators, then, saw that the unvarnished truth is key; people's needs must trump organizational needs.

Finally, still other managers (approximately a quarter of the responses) wanted it both ways, seeking a win–win solution. A Nevada local government middle manager said, “An ethical organization would deal with rumors forthrightly and find ways to retain its best employees.” “Bob can use the code to help him balance competing demands and decide what to do,” wrote a federal professional-technical official in Washington, DC. “He should respect and protect privileged information and behave with integrity toward a colleague.” A federal middle manager in Illinois opined, “Sections III and IV in the code, on personal integrity and ethical organizations, provide some useful guidance. Appropriate encouragement could be given to the employee in such a manner that it would meet the code while not committing insubordination.” Thus, a top Kentucky local administrator specifies that he would do the following:

- Advise Bob that as one of the organization's stars, he is unlikely to lose his position in a reduction in force.
- Review the publicly known facts that could make the organization vulnerable to a reduction in force.
- Not reveal confidential information.
- Refuse to advise the employee on ethical personal decisions.

A more direct approach, however, was recommended by at least a half dozen respondents. To nurture ethical people and organizations, “there is only one policy—be truthful,” according to a North Carolina official. “Bob should ask permission from his manager to respond truthfully to Ron.”

### Table 2: The ASPA Code and the Downsizing Case

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Code as Useful</th>
<th>Code as Not Useful</th>
<th>Code as No Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>231/54.4%</td>
<td>88/20.7%</td>
<td>106/24.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>yes 214/58.2%</td>
<td>no 84/18.8%</td>
<td>70/19.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Please explain your response.
candidate (first presented in 2006). As can be seen, the responses reveal that most administrators found the document to be beneficial in thinking about the larger issues in the cases, as well as in creating strategies to deal with them. A minority of the respondents, however, believed that the code is not practical (personal values predominate in decisions; it contains incompatible ideas), and therefore of no help in addressing the problems. Yet, as noted in the report some 10 years ago (Bowman and Williams 1997, 524), “What is important … is not that the ASPA statement is an imperfect instrument, but rather that dilemmas arise precisely because duties conflict. Both trivial and significant, these conflicts will be resolved by repairing to some standard. In seeking to assist decision makers, the ethical values in the code clearly are important to most of those surveyed.”

Conclusions

This study demonstrates that ethics is a cardinal concern in public administration. Because standards of practice are fundamental in professional life, and ASPA expects members to exemplify the code, what can be done to support them in making principled judgments?

Most respondents in each of the survey years wanted ASPA to assume a proactive position in this area. Although no quantitative data were gathered about the association’s role in 1989, the responses to an essay

| Table 2 Continued |
| Code as not helpful. As for the one-fourth of the sample who found the code not to be useful, they, too, commented on the ASPA statement proper as well as its utility to the case. Concerning the former, these administrators indicated that they would rely on their own experience, values, and feelings to do what is right regardless of what the code says. A New York local government professional-technical staff person observed, “No code of ethics assist in all cases. Public administration is too complex and diverse. It is better to concentrate on developing and hiring ethical employees who can make sound decisions.” A top local official in Michigan said, “The values espoused in the code are too general to be of much use in specific situations.” “The key question,” according to an Arizona state middle manager, “is how can I survive?” A high-level manager in Nevada state government said that “most classes I had in grad school taught ethics as situational. The ASPA code is codified and, therefore, not flexible enough.” These are, then, subjective matters in which no code can be very effective. Perhaps one reason for this viewpoint is that the managers found that the society’s document could be interpreted one way or another because of its competing values. Because its internal contradictions make decision making impossible, “everything” still comes down to personal ethics.

Concerning the scenario specifically, the responses paralleled those just given—that is, the code is not needed or the code provides no solution to the case. “This is a simple case being transparent, open, and honest with employees” said a Florida state government executive. A California high-level official also thought the code was unnecessary, but for a different reason: “Confidentiality is a ‘no brainer.’ I don’t need a ‘code’ to perform basic work functions.” Alternatively, others noted that the code does not solve the problem; for instance, a local-level professional-technical staffer said that “it does not satisfactorily address the issue of where ethical responsibility to the agency and the public interact with ethical treatment of an individual employee.”

| Table 3 The ASPA Code and the Job Candidate Case |
| During a job interview, a candidate for the director of a large agency is asked to agree to terminate a division head as a condition of taking the job. He or she is told that the other finalist for the position has agreed to do so. Does the ASPA code assist in thinking about this case? Please explain your response.

1 Yes [ ] 2 No [ ]

Approximately 75 percent responded. Of those managers, 59 percent agreed that the code assisted them, whereas the balance said it did not. Most explained their answer by commenting on how it either helped or did not help them to consider the broad issues raised or justify their solution to the case.

Code as helpful. “The code provides framework,” according to a professional-technical respondent in Washington, DC, “but the person ultimately is responsible for deciding on a course of action. There may be more than one ‘right’ answer.” A Texas state supervisor wrote, “In the area of ‘serving the public, beyond serving yourself’ (section I of the code), captures how a public servant should handle this situation (currently I am in the ‘dog house’ because I refused to fire someone who was doing a good job).” “I would refer to the code,” a top official in California local government stated, “and then walk out.” A North Carolina professional-technical member said, “It would be unethical to accept (or offer!) a position under these conditions. A decision to terminate must be carefully considered after reviewing the employee’s work history.” “The Personal Integrity and Ethical Organizations sections of the code provide guidance,” a West Coast state manager pointed out. “It’s an unreasonable condition to expect of a director and unfair to inform him that another finalist has agreed. It actually sounds like a ‘trick’ question.” These and many similar responses affirmed the need to strive for professional excellence by adhering to the code in dealing with the situation.

Code as not helpful. As for the one-fifth of the sample who found the code not useful, they, too, commented on the ASPA statement proper as well as its utility to the case. An executive in Pennsylvania state government indicated, “The ASPA code is an ok ‘feel good’ standard developed by academics. It has very little practical value on a day-to-day basis for real administrators.” “I would not rely on the code; I would rely on the principle learned at mother’s knee such as ‘do unto others,’” observed a Virginia local government staff person. “There is no ethical issue here,” stated a California local jurisdiction middle manager (a view shared by a half dozen other survey participants).

“You are hired to terminate a division head, that is the job.” According to a top federal official in Washington, DC, “terminating an employee is neither ethical nor unethical.” A Nevada local-level staffer wrote, “Realistically speaking, I have encountered several employees who’d accepted a position and were told that they had to fire someone. They took their time, assessed the situation . . . and tried to work with the person. They followed all proper procedures . . . and the employee finally left. I agreed with how they handled the situation.”
question on this issue were categorized into three ideas: ASPA as advocate, as consultant, and as evaluator. These functions formed the basis for the multiple-choice item first used in 1996 (Table 4).

In 2006 and 1996, nearly six of every 10 members believed that ASPA should serve as an advocate to promote public service. This includes activities such as offering training, drafting pertinent legislation, and speaking out when officials act (un)ethically. Roughly one-quarter of the sample (23 percent in 2006, 28 percent in 1996) saw the association in a consulting role: developing agency-specific codes and encouraging their adoption through hosting meetings, offering technical assistance, and creating curricula. A small group in both years (8 percent and 6 percent) preferred that the association act in the capacity of an evaluator: reviewing agency programs against ASPA standards, tracking unethical practices, and recognizing (un)ethical conduct. Finally, most of those responding to the open-ended choice (6 percent) approved either a combination of the roles or all three of them.

- “Items 1 and 2 seem appropriate and necessary” (a state executive in Nevada)
- “These are good strategies with the result being a three-pronged approach to teach, model, and then evaluate” (a state middle manager in Ohio)
- “All three, since the needs of different levels of government and types of agencies are at various points on the ethical continuum” (a Seattle official)
- “I would like to see ASPA take on all three roles. To do that ASPA needs to become more prominent again among practitioners. The contribution it can and should be making could be substantive” (a federal middle manager in Washington, DC)

Most administrators over the years, in short, supported the association’s ethics programs and suggested that they be expanded in an advocacy, consulting, or evaluative manner. The code is not regarded as a substitute for developing an ethical organization. Managers recognized that problems are likely and that further measures to assist policy makers are desirable. Frequent survey comments endorsed the continued ASPA focus on ethics as a central priority; indeed, the society cosponsored the creation of Public Integrity Annual in 1995, approved the founding of an ethics section in 1998, and would later assume sole ownership of Public Integrity (the Annual had become a quarterly publication).

To summarize, this report of findings offers empirical data on ethical issues in public management and their implications for professional associations. The survey participants believed that ethics is not a fad and that government has the responsibility to set the example in society. They also held that ethics in the workplace can be empowering, although not all agencies and their executives employ consistent approach to accomplish this. Still, more organizations today take an affirmative “high road” strategy that encourages praiseworthy behavior and provide more training and oversight capacity than was the case earlier. This suggests that there is an ongoing effort to reinforce virtuous public service, an effort that underscores the role of leadership in that endeavor. There is also a belief that well-designed ethics codes can be important in promoting organizational integrity. In fact, ASPA’s creed enjoyed widespread support and use among the respondents; most expressed that a professional association can advance ethics in an advocacy, consultative, or evaluative manner.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2006 Percentage/n</th>
<th>1996 Percentage/n</th>
<th>Please select the statement that best describes the approach that ASPA should adopt in addressing ethical concerns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advocate</td>
<td>58.4 (n=215)</td>
<td>57.2 (n=255)</td>
<td>1 advocate: promote public service as an honorable profession by drafting ethics legislation, offering training to appointed officials, and/or speaking out publicly when public officials act (un)ethically.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consultant</td>
<td>23.6 (n=87)</td>
<td>28.7 (n=128)</td>
<td>2 consultant: develop agency-specific model codes and encourage members to have their agencies adapt and adopt them by providing technical assistance, convening symposium, and/or creating curricula.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluator</td>
<td>7.6 (n=28)</td>
<td>6.1 (n=27)</td>
<td>3 evaluator: appraise agency programs by rating them against the ASPA standards, tracking unethical practices, recognizing individual and agency ethical initiatives and/or investigating those who violate the code.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5.2 (n=19)</td>
<td>5.8 (n=26)</td>
<td>other: No Response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Response</td>
<td>5.2 (n=19)</td>
<td>2.2 (n=10)</td>
<td>100.0 (n=368)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>100.0 (n=446)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
These managers believe that there is a genuine need for ethical guidance in the conduct of government. Future research could build on this need by examining such issues as, what do managers actually do in light of the self-reporting presented in this study? How can the findings here be reconciled with those showing that citizen confidence in government is at all-time lows? Would the code, despite (or perhaps because of) widespread support, benefit from revision in the name of healthy discussion? In addition, how administrators define and reason about ethics, their views on the purpose of codes (including comparing ASPA’s creed to other statements), and ways to enhance ethical leadership in organizations are worthy of exploration. The data gathered in this report also could be manipulated for further analysis.

For now, there is a broad, deep consensus on the significance of ethics among these ASPA practitioner members, suggesting that the strategies discussed here can be meaningful when institutionalized through authentic agency leadership and professional association initiatives. The remarkable attitudinal stability over the years, as well as signs of continued ethical progress, suggests that as a new century unfolds, there is reason to believe that a “no matter how dark the night, the day is sure to come.”

Acknowledgments
Appreciation is expressed to the American Society for Public Administration and the Askew School of Public Administration and Policy at Florida State University for their assistance. Jeremy Plant, Donald Menzel, Montgomery Van Wart, David Schultz, and Carole Jurkiewicz are gratefully acknowledged for their careful reading of an earlier draft.

Notes
1. The telling significance of ethical concerns can be demonstrated by exit polls during the 2006 congressional elections. While almost 60 percent of voters disapproved of the Iraq war, no less than 76 percent said government corruption was more important in casting their ballots (Fournier 2007).
3. As a set of “snapshots” of separate groups in the profession, caution is advised when making generalizations between time periods.
4. Following Dillman’s (2000) tailored design method, a hybrid protocol (a combination of bulk, first-class, and electronic mail in a total of four waves) was utilized. The advantages of this approach include minimization of opportunity costs and the ability to reach respondents whose mail or electronic address may not be accurate. The widely remarked “poll saturation” of the oversurveyed American population, being too busy at work (the number of hours Americans spend at work has increased in recent years), and respondents not seeing the value in the questionnaires (Baruch 1999) may account for the decline in response rate from the earlier studies (49 percent in 2006, 59 percent in 1996 and 1990, 69 percent in 1977). Nonetheless, these response rates raise questions about ethical concern in the ASPA membership as well as that of the larger practitioner community. That is, by their very membership in this professional organization, members and survey participants may be more sensitive to professional values and ethical conduct than nonmembers.
And yet, just under 60 percent of the sample responded in 1990 and 1996 and slightly less than 50 percent in 2006 (at a confidence level of 95 percent, the margin of error is 5 percent).
5. More specifically, in 2006, 81.8 percent were white, 60.6 percent were male, 73.9 percent held at least a master’s degree, 85.3 percent had more than 10 years of experience, 70.1 percent were in middle or top management positions, 56 percent earned more than $90,000 per year, 51.6 percent indicated “moderate” philosophy (25.5 percent identified themselves liberal, 14.4 percent as conservative), and 62 percent had been ASPA members for at least six years. Their employers were state (19.6 percent), federal (15.5 percent), and local (58.4 percent) governments; the remainder were undetermined.
This group does not differ substantially from the earlier samples. A test for nonresponse bias in population samples comparing early and late returned questionnaires (Oppenheim 1966) was conducted, and no significant differences emerged; thus, the typical participant reflects the practitioner members at large.
6. Furthermore, over 60 percent disagreed in both the 2006 and 1996 surveys that “discussing ethics with most managers is difficult because they are concerned with appearing too idealistic
or ‘Sunday-schoolish.’” It appears that ethics may be more laudable than laughable in the hurly-burly of organizational decision making.

7. Agencies, of course, remain a central force in managing human resources. Thus, for instance, “how an organization treats its whistleblowers is an indication of how ethical it is,” a 2006-only statement, endorsed by 70 percent of these managers (11 percent disagreed and 16 percent were undecided) that reflects that fact.

8. For in-depth data on ethics training, see West and Berman (2004).

9. Although these percentages suggest that more organizations are falling under external ethics commissions, an apparent anomaly appears regarding the presence of an external body, as just 35 percent answered “yes” in 2006 compared to 47 percent in 1996 (14.4 percent were uncertain in 2006).

10. Should ASPA pursue the enforcement issue, the results to the questions here—all of which confirm those found in 1989 and 1996—may provide some direction. First, some 80 percent of the administrators agreed that “the greater congruence of a code with preexisting values of employees, the greater its effectiveness.” It appears that any enforcement role should be preceded by an effort to align the national code with that of the agency.

Second, as before, more than 80 percent endorsed the idea that a policy providing “a mechanism for reporting violations that includes protection for the person reporting the problem will be more effective than one which does not have such a mechanism” (4 percent disagreed, 11 percent were unsure).

Thus, these survey participants believed that a code must provide clear procedures to channel communication and also to safeguard employees from harassment. Finally, approximately one-half agreed that “the greater the provision of sanctions in a code for noncompliance, the greater its effectiveness” (24 percent were undecided, 25 percent disagreed), a finding reflecting the uncertain role of a professional association. As in 1996, these results provide support for Weller’s (1988) hypotheses on code effectiveness.

11. For an interesting discussion of potential changes in the code, see Kem (2006).

References
Richter, William L., and Frances Burke, eds. 2007. Combating Corruption, Encouraging Ethics: A


---

**Have You Noticed?**

**PAR is Packed!**

More pages, more content, more topics, more authors, *more perspectives than ever*.

Support our work and your field by joining ASPA today.

Visit: [www.aspanet.org](http://www.aspanet.org)