Commentary

Ethical Leadership in Public Service: A Solid Foundation for Good Government

The article “Does Ethical Leadership Matter in Government? Effects on Organizational Commitment, Absenteeism, and Willingness to Report Ethical Problems” by Shahidul Hassan, Bradley E. Wright, and Gary A. Yukl posits three hypotheses about ethical leadership that lay a solid foundation for larger studies. Further study should utilize a broader cross-section of public servants and cut across job descriptions and ranks of employees. Researchers also should examine the effects of demographics and geography more closely.

“The fish rots from the head” is an adage that is most often heard in a political context, and it reflects the public notion that ethical leadership in government does matter. Certainly, recent history is rife with examples of government leaders implicated in bribery schemes, caught up in sex scandals, or perceived as bullies. While misconduct at the top can set the tone for subordinates’ work environments, we have to be careful about drawing a direct correlation between unethical leadership and the effectiveness of its staff. While the fish might indeed rot from the head, it does so only gradually and might taint only those who work most closely with unethical leaders. Most public servants appear to remain committed to their jobs; their conduct and effectiveness most likely are not affected by ethical lapses on the part of their leadership.

The article’s first hypothesis, that ethical leadership increases the willingness of public sector employees to report ethical violations to management, should be further explored in the context of smaller town or municipal governments or government agencies. Most state governments and larger city governments have independent or separate investigative or ethics agencies to which ethical violations can be reported confidentially and without fear of reprisal. In addition, these days, most employees are protected by whistle-blower laws. In these larger jurisdictions, ethics training is often mandated for all or most employees. The extent to which leaders participate in, and encourage participation in, these training programs can affect sensitivity to actual and apparent ethical problems. Personnel of smaller, local governments might not have the same ability to report ethical violations anonymously. In all cases, there might also be a cultural aversion to informing on (or, in the common vernacular, “ratting out”) fellow workers. Therefore, to further test the validity of the first hypothesis, future researchers should look at a greater variety of agencies, in terms of their size, structure, and perhaps their function, and the degree to which their leaders support ethics training and education programs.

The second hypothesis, that ethical leadership increases the organizational commitment of public sector employees, can be further tested as well. Employees’ commitment to their organizations can only be enhanced if they are made to understand, through training and education, that ethical conduct protects the integrity of the organization’s decision-making process and increases the public understanding of and appreciation for that process. Also, the size and mission of the employees’ government agencies probably affect the degree to which those employees demonstrate organizational loyalty and commitment. In elected officials’ offices, for example, the officials’ staffs are closely identified with, and perhaps seen as an extension of, the officials themselves. Thus, if elected officials conduct themselves unethically, then their staffs are more likely to become demoralized and work less effectively. On the other hand, in larger, multi-purpose government agencies, where most employees neither see nor interact with their agency heads or the agency heads’ inner circles, employees are more likely to be unaffected by their leaders’ unethical conduct. In my many years of public service, I have seen this happen numerous times. Again, to further examine the authors’ second hypothesis, it would be useful to focus on ethics training and to look at the kind of government agency being studied (i.e., whether the agency is headed by an elected or appointed official, among other factors), as well as at the size and mission of the particular government entity.
The third hypothesis, that ethical leadership reduces the frequency of absenteeism for public sector employees, seems to me to be the hardest hypothesis to prove, even if the authors have produced some statistical evidence of a correlation between ethical leadership and the rate of absenteeism. Human nature being what it is, there are simply too many reasons why employees “call in sick” without, in fact, being sick. For example, some people call in sick because they do not have enough vacation days or do not want to use those they do have, or they just cannot get out of bed in the morning.

While the authors make allowances for the variety of explanations for employees’ absences, they and future researchers need to consider that some unethical leaders (most prominently, those classified as bullies) could actually decrease the rate of absenteeism at their agencies through fear and intimidation. Still other employees are deterred from being absent from the office too often simply because almost all government entities have rules and regulations that call for punishing excessive absenteeism; therefore, notwithstanding employees’ levels of job satisfaction, many will keep their absenteeism to a minimum, simply out of a sense of job self-preservation in a weak economy.

Another possible positive result of ethical leadership could be heightened productivity on the part of the workforce and greater public (i.e., customer) satisfaction of the particular constituency a government body is intended to serve. I will leave it to the political scientists and policy analysts to determine how to measure these results, but I suggest, speaking from my own government experience, that these considerations might be germane to an examination of public sector employees’ organizational commitment.

The authors of this article deserve credit for forging new territory in this challenging, often nebulous field of “government ethics.” In further research, they might wish to seek out public servants from diverse backgrounds and draw on their workplace experiences and observations. They might also consider examining government ethics programs, whether implemented by individual government agencies themselves or by external government ethics agencies with broader oversight, and the degree to which leaders take part or encourage participation in ethics training and education programs.