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Ethics in Public Service

The Importance of Studying Ethics for Public Service

Public sector administrators, staff, and elected officials are entrusted in their official capacity to make decisions that are in the best interests of the public. Even in their personal lives, public administrators and elected officials are often held to a higher ethical standard than those working in the private sector. A thorough understanding of ethics provides essential guidance in decision-making. Ethics and professionalism are inextricably linked in a democracy. Decisions made by government officials affect people's lives with consequences that can be life-altering.

Ethics is of particular concern for public administrators for three main reasons. First, ethics is important in its own right. Second, having public power, authority, and accountability in a democracy in effect means that the public service's smooth functioning depends on trust that those with that authority will operate in the public interest. The third reason is the widespread public perception that public service generally falls short of the higher standards of behavior that the public demands. In other words, the public currently has a trust problem with government.

Issues of ethics have a way of finding themselves into every aspect of a public administrator's professional life. Most of these can be understood through the lenses provided in this book. However, those working in government or the nonprofit sector should be aware that most governments and organizations have rules, regulations, and codes of conduct. For government administrators, there may be multiple layers of rules and regulations—those of the organization and those of the higher level of government. There are also civil and criminal laws covering ethical issues. Most of these involve conflict of interest questions. These prohibitions usually focus on minimal standards expected—what you cannot do. A broader ethics perspective, such as that provided in this text, will often get you to the right answer.

For example, picture that you are a federal employee. An elderly next-door neighbor comes to you with a letter from the Social Security Administration. The letter states that he has been declared dead and will be denied any further benefits. He is very nervous and asks you to call for him. You make the call and identify yourself as an executive in another federal agency. You explain that you know how mistakes happen in government and ask how you can help your neighbor get this straightened out. What is wrong with your decision? Private gain is too often understood as your own personal private gain. However, it is also private gain if it serves as private gain for someone else. Under this scenario, you could have called without identifying your work with another agency. In that way, you would have been acting as any concerned citizen, not someone who uses official connections to help someone.

Fundamentally there is an ethical core to public service. Given the power, resources, and uneven sharing of benefit and harm in public life, we cannot afford to lose sight of what is right. The nobility and burden of public service is this: the public expects public service to operate on a higher ethical plane than other activities do. The standards are higher in public service than those associated with personal morality or with the private sector. In addition, the public insists that public servants conform more strictly to the standards.

The Latin word *virtu*, which means excellence, summarizes the demands made on those in public service by public opinion, philosophical tradition, historical experience, and professional identity. The interaction of trust, confidence, and governmental integrity is evident in law and regulation in the United States and other countries. It is conspicuous in governmental codes around the world, and world public opinion mirrors it. It is written into professional standards, and public sector professionals write it into their codes.

In the United States, public administrators operate within a highly complex intergovernmental and interorganizational system. Public administrators must comply with federal and state regulations issued by the executive branch, policies passed by the legislature, and judicial decisions. *Additionally, no state is identical in its set of regulations or in the authority passed down to local government and governments have a multitude of contractual and informal relationships with nonprofit and for-profit organizations. Further complexity results from shifting political norms of the federal and state administrations. Callout Box 1.1 discusses major changes in the U.S. Federal government during the second administration of Donald Trump.* This complexity affects many aspects of a public administrator's working life—including the values and ethics systems that are at the core of public service.

Callout Box 1.1 The Changing Landscape of U.S. Federal Administration

In American public service, uncompromising visionaries, whatever their vision, have been restrained by law, limited and shared power, and moderating virtues. In 1928 (*Olmstead v. United States*), Supreme Court Justice Louis D. Brandeis wrote, "The greatest dangers to liberty lurk in the insidious encroachment by men of zeal, well-meaning but without understanding."

With the presidential election of 2024, the balance of power between the three branches of government dramatically changed. One of the most profound was the creation of DOGE (Department of Government Efficiency) by executive order—which was not a department authorized by Congress but instead operated within the Executive Office of the President. DOGE staff were paid far higher salaries than those they fired, with government paid salaries at \$196,000 per year—the highest salary a civil servant could be paid (Knibbs 2025). DOGE staff were not enforcing any regulations or laws, and they were initially recruited by Elon Musk from his private organizations, not through traditional government hiring processes. DOGE staff, despite not taking an oath of office, had free reign and full access to executive branch agencies. With a stated goal of increasing efficiency, DOGE ordered the firing of staff, cancellation of contracts, and elimination of programs deemed wasteful. The decisions seemed to have little consideration or interest regarding the impact on the functions of agencies or programs. Staff as young as 18 were allowed access to all government information without any clearance or limit. They gave orders to cabinet officials to fire staff based on notions of what they thought was worthwhile. Where public administrators must worry about outcomes, the DOGE was interested in publicizing how much was saved from the cuts (media reports suggested that the figures released may not be accurate).

In fact, after promising trillions of dollars in savings, it eventually came to light that some of the changes cost more than the savings. “The site has come under criticism for not properly displaying the agency’s actions. It includes many contracts on the list of savings that had already been canceled before DOGE entered the White House, and in one instance, an \$8 million saving had been entered as an \$8 billion one instead, according to Reuters” (Burman 2025). Of the \$20 billion in reported savings, \$6 billion came from programs that were canceled before DOGE’s intervention.

The loss of civil servants and the push to replace them with political appointees might have a significant impact of the effectiveness and fairness of federal programs. The willingness of Congress and the Supreme Court to allow the president freedom from the shackles of regulation carries risk. The *Imperial Presidency* was published in 1973. In it, Arthur Schlesinger argued that since the ratification of the Constitution, presidential power was growing beyond the ability of Congress and the courts to control it. At this point, two of the branches of government appear to be bystanders as executive power grows.

(continued)

In testimony given to Congress on February 5, 2025, about the cuts to the federal workforce, Professor William Resh concluded by saying, “The lesson from history and empirical research is clear: a strong, merit-based civil service is essential to both democratic governance and effective policymaking. The reforms proposed by DOGE threaten to undermine this foundation, creating a government that is less competent, less accountable, and ultimately less capable of serving the public good. If these reforms are allowed to proceed unchecked, they will not only weaken the federal government’s ability to function but also erode the very principles that sustain American democracy” (Resh 2025).

Federalism

Public administrators work in a highly complex system encompassing governments, non-profit, and for-profit entities. These organizations are interconnected through a system of laws, cooperative agreements, and contracts. While these relationships can foster collaboration and be essential in addressing complex and deeply rooted societal issues, they can also be adversarial. Oversight mechanisms, including checks and balances established through the federal system of government, can aid in mitigating the risks of corrupt practices. However, adversity can complicate the oversight process.

To understand ethics and accountability for public service, it is important to have a foundational understanding of the system of governance utilized in the United States and several other nations. Federalism, in essence, is the division of power between the national (federal) government and its subnational governments, such as states and provinces. Power is diffused throughout these governments rather than being fully centralized as in a unitary system of government (Elazar 1987).

In the United States, power is shared by the federal and state governments. Local governments are not recognized in the U.S. Constitution. Hence, local governments operate according to state legal requirements. While the national government has a great deal of authority in certain areas—foreign policy and trade, for example—the states have almost control over their internal structure and operations. However, throughout the history of the United States, there have been significant actions taken by the federal government and by the states with an eye toward altering the balance of power between the levels of government and interceding on major social issues such as racial discrimination.

Further adding to the complexity of the U.S. federal system is that power is shared both horizontally and vertically. In the case of the national government and the state governments, power is distributed horizontally through a system of division of powers—executive,

legislative, and judicial. The distribution of powers is accompanied by a set of checks and balances—oversight mechanisms—intended to ensure that one branch of government does not subsume the others.

Balance of Power—State—Federal—Local However, since the ratification of the Constitution established the initial, legal relationship between the federal government and the state governments, various events and issues have arisen that have led to shifts in the balance of power between the levels of government. While an extensive discussion of the historical evolution of federalism is beyond the scope of this book, it is important to note that the relationships between the national, state, and local governments are not static, and these shifts have implications for accountability, ethics, and oversight.

Initially, the national and state governments adhered religiously to independent scopes of authority (coined “dual federalism”). Federal oversight was particularly heavy over the Southern states shortly after the Civil War to protect the rights of previously enslaved citizens. The compromise reached after the disputed Hayes–Tilden election of 1876 led to withdrawal of federal troops from the South and the continuation of white supremacy until well into the twentieth century. As the nation continued to evolve and complexity of government policy increased, the nature of the relationship between the national government and its states evolved as well. For example, the events of the Great Depression quickly led to greater intergovernmental relationships (Wagner 2006) and the federal government developed a stronger interest in policies related to public and environmental safety.

For most of the history of the United States, the various levels of governments have engaged both in actions that promote cooperation between governments while simultaneously taking other actions intended to take or hold authority from the other levels. For example, state government constitutions may proclaim the intent to provide self-government to local governments while also placing substantial restrictions on fiscal autonomy. Congress may declare its support for state independence from federal control while withholding needed grants for failure to adhere to policy directive from the federal government.

Preemption When laws of a higher level of government conflict with that of a lower-level government, the higher level of government’s law typically supersedes that of the lower level; this is called **preemption**. While the federal government holds sole responsibility for powers such as international trade and declaration of war, it is also ultimately responsible for protecting the rights afforded by the Constitution. Therefore, the federal government can use its authority to ensure that states, municipalities, and counties adhere to constitutional provisions for the freedoms outlined in the Bill of Rights including freedom of speech, religion, assembly, the right to a trial by jury, and others. Furthermore, the federal government can act on

abridgements of the 14th and 15th Amendments. However, the federal government (at least in principle) cannot preempt state government law in every case due to the 10th Amendment, which reserves all powers not delegated to the federal government to the state governments.

Unlike the state governments, local governments are created by the states and therefore are not protected by the United States' Constitution. As creatures of the states, local governments have different levels of autonomy depending on the laws in each state that govern the relationships between the state and its local governments. Some states grant local governments home rule status, which is intended to provide substantial powers of self-governance. However, all states have constitutional or statutory provisions that limit local government authority in some way.

Prior to the mid-2000s, preemption laws were primarily used to establish a baseline regulatory standard that local governments could not violate. However, since about 2010, preemption activity has shifted toward laws intended to reduce autonomy of local governments (Riverstone-Newell 2017). While there have always been efforts from the higher levels of government to try to influence policy at the lower level, the punitive nature of this effort seems to have increased and has been particularly pronounced in relationships between state governments and their local governments (May 2018).

Some examples of state governments' preemption of local authority are prohibiting bans on plastic bags, overturning mask mandates during the COVID-19 pandemic, preventing local governments from raising the minimum wage, and anti-sanctuary cities laws. These preemptions have occurred even in states with generous home rule provisions. This shift in preemption activity has been, at least partially, attributed to greater politicization (Fowler and Witt 2019).

The greater level of preemption and the increasing level of divisiveness it potentially creates between the levels of government does have implications for accountability and ethics. For example, state governments could choose to take oversight to such a significant length that local governments would be challenged to efficiently do their day-to-day work. Alternatively, one could argue that greater control by the higher level of government means less scrutiny from the public—so lessened accountability. Another consideration is whether the public will could take a back seat to political interests. In sum, the balance of powers between the different levels of government is an important element of federalism that helps provide accountability to the public interest.

Separation of Powers

A second, key, element of the U.S. federal system of government is separation of powers. The separation of powers between the executive, legislative, and judicial branches was intended by the founders to provide a set of checks to prevent one level of government from exerting an undue level of control over another branch. As originally conceived, at the federal level, the legislative branch (as the branch that most directly represents the people) could arguably be considered the most powerful given its authority to tax and spend, declare war, and negotiate

treaties. Due to the Founders' distrust of a strong executive, the executive branch was intended to be the weakest branch. The federal judiciary was designed, at least in part, to mediate disputes between the other two branches.

Checks and balances provided by the separation of power are critical to holding the federal government (and state governments modeled after the national government) accountable. With a representative government, the electoral system ensures limited accountability at best. As conceived, the three branches of government should exercise oversight over each other. A free press is also critical to making this work—filling in the gaps in checks and balances. Looking back in U.S. history, some of the most significant instances of government corruption and waste were exposed by investigative reporters.

The second inauguration of Donald Trump's as President of the United States ushered in a set of actions that ran counter to the traditional notions of separation of powers. In his second term, President Trump continues to rethink the federal civil service system. On his first day in office shortly after his inauguration on January 20, 2025, President Trump signed a series of executive orders targeting the federal workforce, from instituting a hiring freeze and terminating remote work to turning Senior Executive Service (SES) positions into political loyalty positions as well as dismantling diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility efforts. While, as of the writing of this book, it is difficult to predict whether these actions represent a blip in history or a sea change, they have nonetheless caused considerable disruption in what was thought to be a stable system. This is not to say that past presidents did not take actions that exceeded their traditional authority.

There are also signs that the judicial branch may not hold up to its traditions of precedent in preserving separation of powers, as it has been traditionally conceived, in the face of the actions of the second Trump administration. In reaction to a judicial decision blocking Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency from blocking Treasury Department records, Trump stated "We're very disappointed with the judges that would make such a ruling. . .no judge should frankly be allowed to make that kind of a decision. It's a disgrace" (Gangitano 2025). In later chapters, this book will explore how decisions of the Supreme Court since 2020 have shifted the understanding of prosecutable instances of government corruption and malfeasance.

In the United States, the federal system of government, with power divided between the national and state governments and separated executive, legislative, and judicial authority, was designed with an express goal of preventing tyranny. In Federalist Number 47, James Madison wrote, "the accumulation of all powers, legislative, executive, and judiciary, in the same hands, whether of one, a few, or many, and whether hereditary, self-appointed, or elective, may justly be pronounced the very definition of tyranny" (Madison 1788, 179). The principles on which the Constitution is founded—accountability, democracy, free speech—all depend on maintaining the power dynamics largely as originally conceived. For the purposes of this book, it is

important to understand the importance of the political structure of government that provides the foundation for the administrative apparatus.

For the first 200 years of the nation's founding, there were few guardrails to ensure that the laws Congress passed were implemented efficiently and effectively. This was largely because political patronage (or the **spoils system**) was the predominant mechanism for filling positions in the governments' executive branches. Corruption, waste, and incompetence were the hallmarks of government services at the federal, state, and local levels (Hoogenboom 1959). To address the problems of corruption and undue political influence in the administration of government, in 1883, the Pendleton Act was passed into law. The Pendleton Act established the principle of merit-based hiring for most federal jobs, created the Civil Service Commission (later renamed the Office of Personnel Management), and provided protections for civil service positions. The Pendleton Act is still in effect today. However, to enforce the protections provided through the act would require Congressional intervention—a check on executive branch overreach.

Public sector employees—in all three branches of government and at all levels—play an integral role in making government work in the public interest. The reason public sector ethics is such an essential topic is because of the influence of public administrators on so many aspects of people's lives. While this book describes instances when accountability and ethics protections fail, for the most part, the people who choose to work in government do so due to their personal commitments to serve the public.

Public Service's Scope and Soul

Public service is *doing* and for that reason is defined as much by its public mission—what the administrator is doing—as by public law or other formal criteria. While it may seem that there is a clear dichotomy between public and private service, in fact, there is no clear division between public and private (Kettl 2009; O'Leary and Bingham 2009). Boundaries are ambiguous and dynamic, where there are boundaries at all. Paul Light (1999, 1) announced “the end of the government-centered public service and the rise of a multi-sectored service to replace it” more than a quarter century ago.

For many years, reformers have tried to find the answer to maximizing efficiency in the federal government. Despite decades of increased contracting out of services, the size and scope of the U.S. national government remains unmatched by any other organization, public or private. In the 1970s, President Jimmy Carter touted **Zero-Based Budgeting** (ZBB) as an antidote to inefficiency. Ronald Reagan turned to **Total Quality Management** (TQM) (Deming 1982). The implementation of **reinventing government**, a hallmark of the Clinton Administration, was the responsibility of Vice President Al Gore (Osborne and Gaebler 1992). During the Obama administration, there was a focus on eliminating redundant operations, reducing contracts, and eliminating fraud and abuse. In 2025, Donald Trump's

second administration was the first to turn the task of reforming the federal government's executive branch over to the private sector by empowering the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) and allowing it to be run by Elon Musk, who held no official government position.

The size and shape of the public sector is dynamic and multidimensional. Instead of a two-dimensional continuum it would be more accurately described as a three-dimensional web. H. George Frederickson (2010, 239) commented, "Just as governments float in a vast public sea, so, too, do nonprofit organizations, churches, businesses and corporations, tribes, clubs, networks, and all other human collectives." In other words, public sector organizations operate in a system that includes all types of organizations—government, for-profit, and nonprofit. As their relationships, collaborators, networks, partners, and tasks change over time and over different situations, public organizations shift their positions in this system. In fact, many hold different positions at the same time. The many mixed activities and joint operations, such as public-private partnerships and contractual or collaborative relationships, all contribute toward public service.

Embracing more than government alone, the idea of the **public sector** includes quasi-governmental agencies, and the many nonprofit organizations devoted to community services and the **public interest** (and are often publicly funded, at least in part). These purposes explain the tax-exempt status granted by the Internal Revenue Service to many nonprofit organizations. Called **civil society organizations** or nongovernmental organizations in many other countries, they include charitable, educational, cultural, and health organizations; private, family, community, and corporate foundations; religious congregations; chambers of commerce, fraternal organizations, and civic leagues; and organizations whose primary purpose is advocacy. The hard part about working for the best interests of the public, however, is knowing what "the best" is and then doing it. This is what ethics is all about.

Fusing Compliance and Integrity

What do administrators do with this professional legacy? Public service's track record counsels a go, but go-slow attitude toward ethics in the workplace. Wariness, instead of paralyzing administrators, can short-circuit both excessive regulations and unbridled expectations. While a successful public sector organization requires ethical behavior, it is not the single qualifying condition for success. A cautious attitude can prevent the later repudiation that is inevitable if ethics is set up as the single panacea for all managerial ills.

Public administration practice and theory offer two often opposing routes to the goal of encouraging ethical practice and ethical practitioners in public agencies. These routes encourage different behavior, make use of different vehicles, promote different purposes, and lead in different directions. However, there is also a third path that merges the other two and moves public service at slow speed in the direction of moderation and innovation.

The Low Road of Compliance **Compliance** means adhering to rules or laws. The path of compliance is a largely proscriptive, coercive, punitive, and even threatening route. This approach to ethics is designed to spur obedience to minimum standards and legal prohibitions. It is enforced by controls on the job that ordinarily aim at acceptable levels of risk, not flawless purity. John Rohr (1989, 60) calls this the “low road.” It features “adherence to formal rules” and a negative outlook. Along this road, Rohr (63) argues, “Ethical behavior is reduced to staying out of trouble,” and the result is “meticulous attention to trivial questions.” Compliance is the legacy of a profession created to root out endemic corruption during the time when political machines had considerable control over systems of government at all levels.

In managerial terms, compliance translates into oversight and controls. When it comes to ensuring accountability, this is the primary mechanism used in the complex, highly structured, and very powerful organizations labeled bureaucracy. Realistically, public administrators are not about to purge compliance from government operations. Nor should they want to. Represented by administrative controls and legal sanctions, compliance is fundamental to the way the public’s business is conducted. As guardians of political relationships, political goals, and the public interest, controls are necessary to implement accountability. Traditional managerial functions, such as budgeting and personnel, are replete with controls.

To function ethically and effectively, multiple means of **accountability** are necessary in a representative democracy. There are more than 90,000 governments in the United States, employing more than 20 million people (U.S. Census Bureau 2022). Voters elect representatives at all levels of government but are rarely able to accurately observe what either their elected representatives or the administrators are doing day-to-day. Rules and regulations are used as one means toward greater accountability, though this mechanism is imperfect.

The High Road of Integrity The path of integrity is ethics in the raw. Relying on good character, this route is based in principled judgment; it counts on ethical public administrators individually to reflect, decide, and act. Integrity is a basic ethical value, not limited to public service by any means. Ethical behavior draws on appropriate values and principles, absorbed from upbringing, philosophy, the organization, or, in John Rohr’s classical formulation, regime values as constitutionally derived ethical **norms**. Individual responsibility is both a starting and an end point on the integrity route in public service. Along the route lie the normative, voluntary, prescriptive, persuasive, and the positive—but not external inducements or penalties.

An approach based solely on individual integrity brings its own difficulties. It bypasses unethical behavior entirely and preaches to the believers. When reduced to simplistic do-good exhortation, it overlooks the competing claims that perplex ethical public administrators. By neglecting the decision-making environment and focusing exclusively on autonomous moral

individuals, the integrity approach sweeps aside organizational and other influences that affect behavior. Given the reality that the organization is an important influence on an individual's behavior, an exclusive focus on the individual operates at an inappropriate level of analysis. Perhaps more to the point, the integrity route does not seem to have worked all that well because abuse and corruption persist.

The Fusion Road The low road of compliance does not care that most people want to make good decisions, only that most people meet minimum standards of conduct. Integrity's high road rejects administrative realities that stem from accountability. Both mistakenly reduce the world to two distinct categories—ethical and unethical. Unfortunately, public sector decisions are more akin to shades of gray than to black or white. Public administrators operate in a system composed of legitimate but competing values, principles, and duties. Neither approach alone accomplishes the purpose of spurring ethical practice and practitioners in public service. Public service and public employees would both be well served by merging the best from the compliance and integrity roads. Such a merger fuses forces together to meet the public service purpose discussed at the start of this chapter.

This fusion of compliance and integrity is the path of moderation, adaptation, and compromise; it works through phased innovation on both compliance and integrity fronts and at a slow pace. It focuses on public service's goals, along with its problems. A two-pronged, systematic approach accomplishes this by incorporating both compliance with its formal standards and the promotion of individual ethical responsibility. Ethics demands informed reflection and individual judgment; ethical public administrators are counted on to make sober decisions.

Trust, Competence, and Effectiveness

While the public supports the role of government in providing a broad range of public services, they do not trust the government a great deal (Newport 2022). As shown in Figure 1.1, trust in government in the U.S. has been declining, and by 2024, only 22% of those surveyed said they trust the federal government to do what is right just about always or most of the time (Pew Research Center 2024). Local governments perform much better in these polls, with a majority of those surveyed reporting that they have confidence that they will do the right thing (Jones 2023).

Unfortunately, it is difficult to separate out opinions about elected officials from that of public administrators. However, many still use the term “bureaucrat” pejoratively. The second Trump administration's nearly unchallenged mass layoffs of the federal workforce within a month of taking office gives credence to the idea that the negative bias toward government workers is widespread.

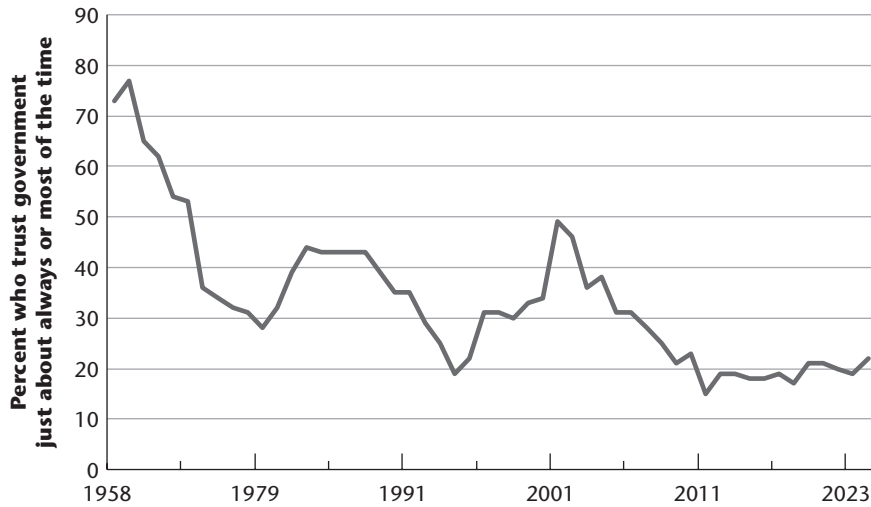


Figure 1.1 Trust in Government 1958–2024.

Source: Created by Kimberly L. Nelson using data from Pew Research.

Adapted from <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/06/24/public-trust-in-government-1958-2024/>

Public confidence in and experience with the ability of government to perform and handle problems are judgments about competence, a matter different from judgments about ethical behavior and trustworthiness. However, government effectiveness is at least partially dependent on the public’s willingness to comply with rules and regulations and to support policy choices instituted by government. That willingness to comply is, in turn, influenced by level of trust (Besley and Dray 2024).

Values in Public Service

An ethical value is a deeply held belief about right and wrong action and a gauge of what is important. Another useful definition holds that values are “judgments of worth that guide decision-making and action” (van der Wal and de Graaf 2007, 51). As ideals held dear (or valuable), ethical values are yardsticks for ethical behavior that draw on both emotion and reason. But not all values are ethical values, and particular values are not necessarily associated with ethical behavior.

Some are virtues—the habits of ethical action embedded in moral character that underlie ethical behavior and translate abstract, ethical values into customary, observable behavior. Virtues are labels for behavior that need no justification but are widely considered admirable. Many ancient traditions stress personal virtue, and Plato wrote of four: courage, wisdom, justice, and moderation. In Buddhist teachings, “Good men and bad men differ from each other in their natures. . . Wise men are sensitive to right and wrong” (Bukkya 1987, 264). In Exodus 18:21,

Moses's father-in-law advises Moses to form his "management team" for the desert trek this way: "Provide out of all the people able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness; and place such over them, to be rulers."

Some values are so widely shared that they underpin behavioral **norms**, or standards or rules specifying proper conduct in certain circumstances. Yet widespread agreement on a norm does not necessarily translate into general obedience to it. For example, more than 89% of respondents in Gallup's 2022 national poll agreed that adultery ("married men and women having an affair") is morally wrong. This behavior topped the list among the 19 different behaviors polled (Brenan 2022; as a point of reference, note that sex between an unmarried man and woman was judged as morally wrong by 23% of the respondents). Other polls show similar results: that fidelity is a widely shared ethical value. Yet if we consider media reports about adulterous politicians, entertainers, and sports celebrities, violations of the norm are obvious, and yet the public is unlikely to hold them accountable.

Because not all values are ethical values, values and virtues that are considered essential differ from place-to-place and may even differ from person to person. That list may relate to generic modern management, focus specifically on public sector management, or center squarely on democratic ideals. In the democratic mode, Stephen Bailey, an influential figure in twentieth-century public administration, selected optimism, courage, and "fairness tempered by charity" (1964, 236). The list has gotten longer since his time. For public administrators, ASPA's Code of Ethics emphasizes serving the public interest, legal compliance, personal integrity, impartiality, transparency, competence, the values on Bailey's list, and still others. For local government leaders, the International City/County Management Association's (ICMA) Declaration of Ideals highlights effectiveness, engagement, and responsiveness (ICMA n.d.).

Principles are values with an action component. The Preamble to the U.N. Convention Against Corruption specifies "the principles of proper management of public affairs and public property, fairness, responsibility and equality before the law and the need to safeguard integrity and to foster a culture of rejection of corruption" (United Nations 2004, 6). Similarly, the European Commission developed a set of public administration principles to guide the European Union's work to improve public governance.

Are public management's typical values different from the values in business management? The answer is important because of the historical and current influence of business management and techniques on public administration. The idea that the values associated with public service are different from those common in business is embedded in our political culture. Whether this view condemns public service for inefficiency or condemns business for personal profit depends on the historical period and political climate. In *The Shame of the Cities* (1904), the influential **muckraker** Lincoln Steffens wrote, "The commercial spirit is the spirit of profit, not patriotism; of credit, not honor; of individual gain, not national prosperity; of trade and dickering, not principle" (7).

Considerations of public versus private sector values also help to clarify dominant values in the public sector. This very question assumes that the realm of work can be separated from and is different from the personal sphere, the type of organization affects ethical norms, and people sort or compartmentalize the values relevant to a particular setting.

Empirical evidence provides some answers about public and private sector values. One study of executives in the federal government and in business found that the values are different (Posner and Schmidt 1996). Public sector values include impartiality and dedication versus the profit motive that is prominent in private sector organizations. Table 1.1 summarizes the findings of a study in the Netherlands (Van der Wal et al. 2008). The researchers found that while there are a set of core values shared in both sectors, there are also distinct values that are distinct to each sector.

Core Values and Action Principles For public service, there is consensus that certain values are of special concern. They are part of the answer to the question, “Why me?” These values support principles of action that distinguish public service from other work environments. However, the values, principles, duties, and rules are so numerous they may be challenging for a public administrator to sort out.

Figure 1.2 captures the more prominent values and the actions that the values trigger. The foundational values are limited to five for easy recall: accountability, impartiality, justice and fairness, doing good, and avoiding doing harm. Accountability is at the top, to highlight the value that is especially critical in a democracy. These five values flow logically from the definition of public servants as temporary **stewards** of public authority.

A public servant is a fiduciary or temporary steward of public power, resources, and trust. As such, public servants exercise public power and authority. Their positions are neither theirs to own nor to keep. In the context of this text, the meaning of **stewardship** is to preserve the value of an asset, community, or interest over time and safeguard the public’s interests, along with future

Table 1.1 Value Differences in the Public and Private Sectors

Distinct Public Sector Values	Distinct Private Sector Values	Core Shared Values
Lawfulness	Profitability	Accountability
Incorruptibility	Innovativeness	Expertise
Impartiality	Honesty	Reliability
		Effectiveness
		Efficiency

Source: Adapted from Van der Wal et al., 2008.

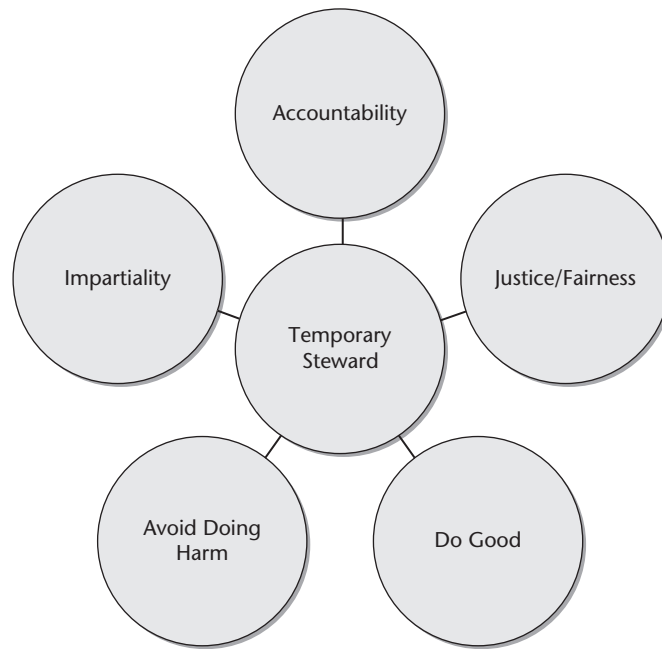


Figure 1.2 Core Values and Action Principles.

Source: Created by Kimberly L. Nelson (2025)

choices and opportunities. “Value” here is thought of in broad terms and refers to more than financial value. A more formal definition of *stewardship* is “the willingness and ability to earn the public trust by being an effective and ethical agent” and “signifies the achievement of both effectiveness and ethicality” (Kass 1990, 113, 129).

Each of the five values is bedrock—a foundation for principled action by the temporary steward—and together they represent the common core of public service. This approach calls on Aristotle’s “mean” (also known as the golden mean) in which balance is sought among seemingly incompatible values or priorities—two contrasting extremes (Kraut 2022). The values are moderated by the multiple duties operating together in an interaction that triggers derivative values such as prudence and temperance. For example, doing good (or beneficence) is moderated by justice/fairness and accountability. Calling for taking care of the dependent and vulnerable, doing good is constrained by law and agency mission. Justice and fairness are bundled together because the distinction is variable, and the two terms are often used interchangeably.

Each of the five core values in Figure 1.2 can be supported by a set of ethical principles or guides to ethical action (see Table 1.2). These “intermediate-level concepts” (Bebeau and

Thoma 1999) are relatively concrete applications to day-to-day activities on the job. They are the middle ground in a three-tiered construct and fall between the highly abstract (see the discussion of Kohlberg in Chapter 6, for example) and specific standards of conduct (Chapter 8).

The many actions in Table 1.2 necessarily depend on the virtue of courage to move theory into practice. Effectiveness (assessed relative to the agency’s mission) and efficiency are shown as ethical because of the understood or spoken promise to serve as stewards of public resources. So too is competence, based on the promise to do the job for which one is hired. Transparency is listed under accountability because it is a means of achieving external accountability.

The fundamental ethical prescription to do no harm first expressed in the Hippocratic Oath is not enough in public service; rather, the public servant is directed to do the right thing in the right way. Admittedly, sometimes the action principles may seem to demand moving at the same time in different directions. When this happens, priorities and judgment kick in to move the decision-maker toward creativity and leadership.

The point of the core values and principled behaviors is not to encourage rigidity; rather it is to suggest that the reader reflect on the many demands made on public servants, not to fix them in place for all time and for all of public service. This framework illustrates how reasonable, ethical people may arrive at the same place or understand how people may get to different places when making a decision.

Why not select a single roster of ethical values? A short list—plain dealing and direct—would be more compelling and maybe more appealing. But it also would impose an authoritarian,

Table 1.2 Core Values and Guides to Ethical Actions

Accountability	Justice and Fairness	Do Good	Avoid Doing Harm	Impartiality
Take responsibility for what is done and how	Comply with the law	Employ empathy	Provide remedy or relief	Avoid conflict of interest
Reject incompetence	Seek procedural and substantive justice	Give affirmative help	Use moral imagination	Seek inclusion
Facilitate transparency	Seek fair distribution of public benefits			Be objective
Listen; be responsive				Pursue the public interest
Seek effectiveness				
Seek efficiency				

even imperial stamp that contradicts the very meaning of ethics. The answer lies in what ethics itself is all about:

- Ethical action is in part reflective, based on thought and reason as well as emotion.
- Ethical action is principled and draws on sound values.
- Ethical action means making normative judgments, and that means choice.

The Trouble with Values People are not required to be consistent, so their values do not necessarily fit together. Values also may not be identical across different policy areas. Also, priorities among values change, responding at least in part to the current problems and discontents that people face.

Where ethics and government are concerned, variation, change, and inconsistency characterize public views.

For much of the past decade, the majority opinion in the United States has favored governmental activism on behalf of promoting “traditional” values. Yet many members of the public call for a reduced role for government and complain about government’s intrusive and negative impact on society, the economy, and peoples’ lives. Although many Americans judge government to be ineffective, almost three-fifths indicate that its policies have a “significant effect on the moral values” (Jones 2006). Many Americans also want the very government that they distrust to take an active role in promoting what they call “traditional” values (Saad 2011).

Values may be associated with ethical or moral character or policy choices. For better or worse, language lacks the precision of mathematics. As it turns out, most Americans mean the moral character of the candidates when they say that “moral values” are a very important factor in their deciding how to vote. A candidate’s character (truthfulness and integrity, for example) is important to a large majority of the public, but this does not necessarily imply support for or opposition to particular policy positions (McNerney 2008). Because analysts and pundits often mean the issues and policy choices, experts and ordinary citizens may talk right past each other.

Competing Ethical Claims

Rival claims devour a public administrator’s time, attention, and loyalties. Competing values and duties in modern life pull people in different directions, and geographic mobility disrupts ties that once upon a time lasted a lifetime. Ask the multitasking city manager or the ranger for the National Park Service who gets transferred from Yellowstone to the Statue of Liberty. Competing values are an inescapable feature of public administrators’ world. Increasing prevalence of technology allows competing demands to invade every arena, every moment. These pressures can fragment thinking and even shatter undisciplined administrators who exercise no selectivity about what needs their attention.

Choices among priorities and responsibilities are made with an eye to **roles**—the sources of operative ethical responsibilities—that define one’s own behavior and that of others in different circumstances. In the government, given the operational values, those roles center around professionalism and political neutrality. By contrast, the acknowledged driver in business is the bottom line: a business either makes a profit or it does not. The public sector’s multiple bottom lines are far harder to measure than profit. To complicate matters further, blurred boundaries between the public and private sector and the increasing demands for greater intergovernmental collaboration are reconfiguring the public sector’s new reality.

Michael Harmon’s “theory of countervailing responsibility” organizes opposing aspects of administrative responsibility into three types: the political, professional, and personal. “Action that is deemed correct from the standpoint of one meaning might very well be incorrect or irresponsible from the standpoint of another” (1990, 154). Therefore, tension is built into administrative life. Harmon (157) defines each type:

- *Political responsibility*: “Action that is accountable to or consistent with objectives or standards of conduct mandated by political or hierarchical authority.”
- *Professional responsibility*: “Action that is informed by professional expertise, standards of ethical conduct, and by experience rooted in agency history and traditions.”
- *Personal responsibility*: “Action that is informed by self-reflexive understanding; and emerges from a context of authentic relationships wherein personal commitments are regarded as valid bases for moral action.”

Competing claims and interests are inevitable when the public service role is defined as distinct and different from other roles. The very distinction—the separation itself—is what creates conflict. This realistic perspective encourages a view of public administrators as people who lead fulfilling lives, cherishing their jobs, families, friends, and communities.

The Ethical Claims of Five Different Roles There are five primary clusters of roles (personal, professional, organization, jurisdiction, society) with which public administrators cope (Figure 1.3). Public administrators should assess the various roles that they play and the seriousness of competing ethical claims; although there may be strong reasons for opting for one role over another, they need not be ethical reasons. A role defines the capacity in which the public administrator is acting and the behavior suitable to it. Each role signals different bundles of concerns, values, and behavioral norms, and each is marked by a mix of ethical claims, or duties. Some duties are **responsibilities**, meaning self-imposed, voluntary, and informal. Other duties are **obligations** that are formal, externally imposed, and enforced through legal or other sanctions. The fact that both types of claims confront managers evokes the enduring distinction

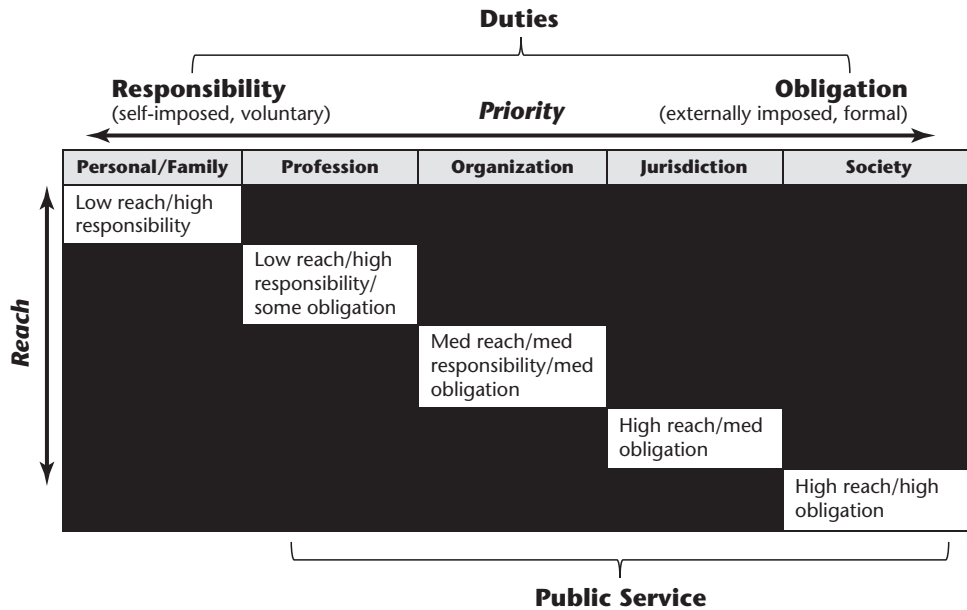


Figure 1.3 Role Diagnosis.

Source: Created by Kimberly L. Nelson

between law and ethics. Responsibilities tend to be broad, even diffuse; obligations, if only for enforcement purposes, tend to be narrow and clearly defined.

The personal role encompasses the individual, their family, personal beliefs, and community connections, and it shapes daily life and emotional relationships. While its ethical claims are self-imposed, they are still typically compelling. Sometimes, this personal role is perceived as a sanctuary from external intrusion, regulation, or scrutiny, leading to a confusion with the concept of “the private” and privacy. This confusion can result in misunderstandings about role boundaries. To illustrate, President Chester A. Arthur is quoted as saying, “I may be president, but my private life is nobody’s damned business” (Hochschild 1998, 76).

Although many Americans value privacy and emphasize the informal responsibilities associated with the personal role, the equation of personal and private simply does not hold up historically or today. Individual, familial, and community obligations have long been written into law and backed by serious sanctions, from the ancient Code of Hammurabi and the Book of Leviticus through today’s inheritance, divorce, child abuse, right-to-die, and other laws.

In contrast, the set of claims associated with one’s part in human society is more abstract, inherently inclusive, often self-generated, and typically less forceful. Figure 1.3 illustrates the relationship between the scope of duties and their priority, showing that duties with a higher

priority tend to have a greater impact on behavior. This reasoning highlights the distinction between formal obligations imposed due to working in public service and the responsibilities customarily associated with roles outside the profession, agency, or jurisdiction. Figure 1.3 depicts public service as potentially including all but the personal domain.

Public service has evolved toward transforming responsibilities into obligations and obligations into legal requirements through the adoption of enforceable standards of conduct. A public service role is often associated with legal obligations, in the sense that minimum claims are specified in written rules and enforced through legal or administrative provisions and penalties. These obligations are commonly formalized through accountability mechanisms (codes of ethics or behavior). Central to many are serving the public interest and complying with the law, but they are not the only ethical duties in public service. Some professional associations, such as the International City and County Management Association (ICMA) and the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA), self-police members' adherence to formal obligations; other associations, such as the American Society for Public Administration (ASPA) and the Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA), reject enforcement while articulating relatively broad duties.

Given the differences between public service and other roles, as well as among ethical claims, conflicts are inevitable. Each of the five primary role clusters has numerous facets, and all five are interconnected, sometimes directly and other times filtered or mediated through intervening claims. The diverse roles public administrators play create many responsibilities and obligations. Do these different roles—child, parent, spouse, sibling, friend, neighbor, taxpayer, employee, public servant, citizen, and patriot—apply to you? Do they make different claims on you? Do these claims sometimes conflict? For instance, did you ever have to be in two places at the same time? How about the dilemma of an emergency at work versus your child's game you promised to watch?

Although public leaders cannot reasonably be expected to abandon other relationships and affiliations, they are nonetheless obligated not to use their public positions to serve their personal interests. This is the essence of **conflict of interest**. For example, being a parent does not make hiring your child (**nepotism**) right; owning a business does not exempt you from obligations to the town. The separation of public and personal life in modern organizations reinforces a central ethical duty to avoid conflicts of interest that injure or appear to undercut independent, impartial, and objective judgment. (The positive version of this is to serve the public interest.)

Following the trail of attachments and commitments to their primary source helps public administrators understand and meet different claims. For this reason, Figure 1.3 is a tool for role diagnosis. Role diagnosis stands guard against conflicts of interest. This tool asks, "What hat am I wearing?" and "What are my obligations?" It is a good first step toward resolving a dilemma.

However, keep in mind that role diagnosis is too crude to be used independently. Ethical problems are not solved by a simple-minded winner-takes-all approach. One role may not automatically and thoughtlessly cancel all the others without seriously damaging them.

Getting It All Together Evidence of the strains caused by competing claims is evident in many aspects of our lives, particularly in the context of family dynamics. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on December 10, 1948, as “a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations,” identifies rights and responsibilities on many levels: the individual, family, community, society, state, and humanity. According to Article 16 (3), “The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State.” Clashes are predictable with Article 29(l), which declares, “Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible.”

Kenneth Boulding (quoted in Boling and Dempsey 1981, p. 13) suggests that while we still think in terms of a society with small and weak organizations, where the family is the primary institution, the family’s influence has diminished in the United States. Extended families, tribes, and even nuclear families are no longer the sole or dominant relationships in which individuals live their full lives. This shift has been influenced by various developments, including the market economy, increased physical mobility late in life, improvements in geriatric medicine, and other developments. Modern public administrators face a complex landscape of competing claims and loyalties, requiring them to navigate this maze effectively or risk becoming immobilized.

Personal Integrity

The tensions caused by competing ethical claims can jeopardize personal **integrity**, which is maintaining one’s integrity, wholeness, balance, and ethical sincerity. Ethical values are the foundation of personal integrity, not self-indulgence. Demonstrating authentic, unbiased convictions and holding the high ground is a measure of a public administrator’s skill and character, and it is widely praised. A manual for local administrators in seventeenth-century China advises, “An official’s first consideration is maintaining his integrity” (Huang 1984, 141).

To truly fulfill the duties depicted in Figure 1.3, public administrators must exercise integrity as ethical stewards in public service. Integrity is more akin to a web than a hierarchical structure, which is “too static and rigid to account for the way individuals live their lives and keep moral coherence” (Dobel 1990, 355). Integrity is tested by real-world challenges. Uniform or static perspectives do not help public administrators maintain their integrity. Instead, integrity demands principled flexibility under fluid circumstances. This ambiguity and choice are precisely the essence of ethics. The normative rules of ethics help decision makers make choices that demand the exercise of reasoned judgment bolstered by intuition (gut feel) and emotion.

Ethics, Democracy, and Professionalism

Professional public administration in the United States has a rich history spanning over a century. Throughout this period, it has demonstrated remarkable adaptability, evolving to meet the changing demands of society, economy, organizations, and technology. This adaptability has led to the incorporation of new values that shape its principles and practices. For instance, consider the U.S. Constitution, which provides a stark contrast in definitions of fairness. The 14th Amendment's equal protection clause emphasizes treating everyone identically, while the 16th Amendment's income tax clause acknowledges the need to treat individuals differently based on their circumstances.

Today's public service is a blend of often conflicting values and the action principles they underpin. These values and principles coexist simultaneously and are in tension with one another. Because public administrators—and services and policies they oversee—cannot and should not oscillate between these extremes; they must reconcile the values and balance the claims every day.

A public position itself is ethically neutral—it can be used for good or ill, right or wrong—until individuals—or those in power—use it—or abuse it—for something other than addressing problems and fulfilling the mission of the organization or government. To answer the question, “What is crucial for an ethical public administrator?” the authors propose three core answers: ethics, democracy, and **professionalism**. Combined, they protect and promote individual and institutional integrity. Figure 1.4 presents a comprehensive list of the many values and virtues associated with each of these principles.

The purpose of this reflection is not to impose permanent solutions for all public administrators but rather to explore various alternatives that will allow for personal preferences, deletions, or shifts in choices. One such alternative to Figure 1.4 is the set of values claimed by OECD members mentioned earlier in the chapter.

Incorporating democracy into this discussion on public service ethics stems from its practical reality and operational framework for public service in the United States. Democracy upholds values such as impartiality, justice, the rule of law, liberty, equality, and human dignity. It also emphasizes accountability and transparency. ASPA's code of ethics emphasizes these principles, urging recognition and support for the public's right to know and promoting constitutional principles of equality, fairness, representativeness, responsiveness, and due process in protecting citizens' rights.

Professionalism is an important part of the solution. In today's world, credentials and expert knowledge hold immense importance in governance, self-image, and various aspects of life. How many of us think of ourselves as a professional in one walk of life or another? Does anyone we know admit to intentionally acting unprofessionally? Professionalism calls on the values of excellence, quality, competence, and merit. Professions tend to be (1) self-regulating

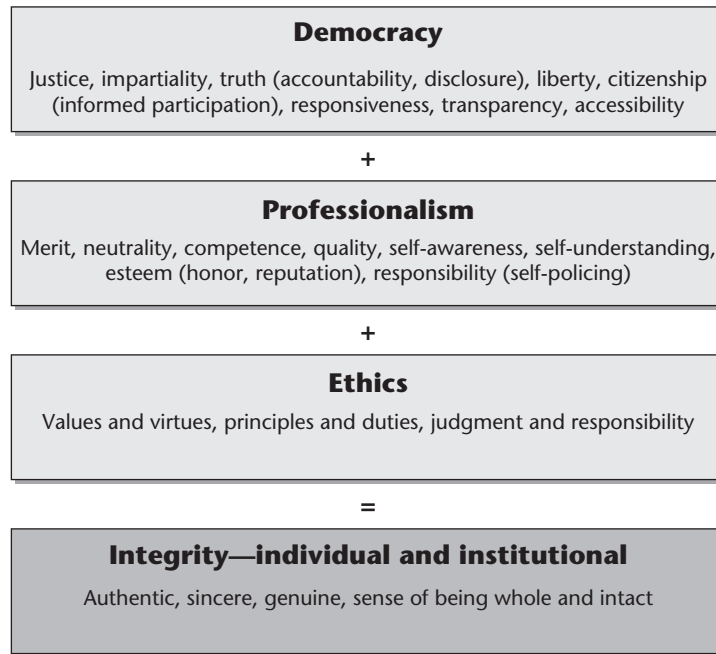


Figure 1.4 Integrity = Democracy + Professionalism + Ethics.

Source: Created by Kimberly L. Nelson (2025)

and self-policing, (2) marked by a common body of expert knowledge, (3) populated based on credentials and expertise rather than blood lines or wealth, and (4) a source of members' autonomy from the employing organization.

Ethics serves as a check on self-serving or arbitrary behavior, replacing it instead with many duties. Ethics provides an independent perspective, enabling individuals to make systematic, reasoned judgments about right and wrong, while also taking responsibility for these judgments. Ethics is not merely armchair activity; it demands decisive action rooted in moral values and principles that define what is right and important. These values and virtues encompass concepts like justice, compassion, honesty, loyalty, and even traditional ones such as humility, temperance, and prudence. Ethics is action that you can defend publicly and should be accepted both by the individual and the community. Public service is inherently about power, which also means that it is about survival. The key to ethical professionals' survival is personal integrity, which means taking a sincere and principled ethical stance. Integrity is important for its own sake, and it is also crucial as a building block of public confidence and trust in a democratic system. Moreover, public administrators' own integrity is one of the few things they can take away from the halls of public service and into "civilian" life.

What to Expect Moving Forward

Before previewing the contents in the remainder of the book, it is important that the readers share the same understanding of some basic definitions. Public administrators perform their duties diligently, solve problems, and even accomplish remarkable feats. They also uphold ethical standards. Personal, professional, and public expectations collectively challenge administrators who address both routine and emergency ethical dilemmas. Ethical conduct is an integral part of their responsibilities.

To facilitate a meaningful and practical dialogue in this text, we need to begin with a shared understanding of some terminology. First and foremost, **ethics** involves systematically considering our moral principles and conduct and how we treat others.

Only a few definitions are needed in this first chapter. The definitions are kept few and simple, so as not to divert attention from the pressing issues public administrators face on the job. First, **ethics** involves thinking systematically about morals and conduct and how we treat other people.

In everyday use, “ethics” often refers to principles of action that implement or promote moral or ethical **values**. **Morals** (derived from the Latin *mores*, or customs) refers to standards of right conduct. To avoid engulfing the discussion in terminology, many sources (for example, Singer 1979) and this book use *ethics* and *morals* interchangeably.

Ethical choice is the heart of good moral character to which most of us are exposed as children. These are the choices in which people attempt to distinguish right from wrong. Character means having appropriate ethical values and is associated with virtues such as honesty and fidelity. Sometimes called a “moral compass,” character is a sort of internal gyroscope that helps a person distinguish right from wrong and inhibits wrongdoing. Bringing their moral character to the job, ethical public administrators do a two-step: they use informed, systematic reasoning and follow it by action.

In sum, the subject of ethics is action based on judgments of right and wrong. Three questions summarize the subject’s practical underpinnings: (1) What counts in public service? (2) What is at stake? (3) How can public administrators ensure professional success and ethical survival? Finer distinctions and elegant terminology are available for conceptual clarification, but they threaten to bury the subject in words, killing interest along with utility, for practical managers who are more concerned with deeds than definitions.

Chapter 1 Case: In the Line of Duty

On an early fall morning, there was a crash on a highway within a major Southern U.S. city. A car, with only the driver as an occupant, was speeding (70 MPH in a 40 MPH zone), crossed the median and crashed into the bridge supporting an overpass. The driver

was killed on impact. Blood tests later revealed the driver had a blood alcohol level that was nearly double the legal limit.

Since the crash occurred within city limits, an investigation into the events leading up to the crash was initiated by the city's district attorney. The investigation found that the state trooper had been pursuing the driver prior to the crash for speeding but, when the driver reached a speed of greater than 100 MPH, the trooper turned off his lights and slowed down. Soon after, the driver lost control of the vehicle and crashed into the median.

The investigation also reported that the trooper was recorded on his body cam video calling emergency dispatch and then calling his supervisor. During that call, the trooper told his supervisor that he attempted to stop the driver and that he disengaged before the crash. The report also alleged that the supervisor told the trooper not to tell city police officers that he had attempted a stop. Instead, he suggested the trooper tell the city police that he had "rolled up on" the crash.

The investigative report then stated that when city police officers arrived, they asked the trooper whether he had tried to pull the driver over prior to the accident. The trooper is alleged to have lied to the officer and responded that he did not pursue the vehicle but had come upon the wreck after the accident and saw smoke and debris coming from the vehicle.

The DA's office concluded that the trooper had not committed a criminal violation since the driver was speeding and it was appropriate for him to begin a pursuit. However, following the release of the DA's report, the driver's family filed a lawsuit against the trooper, claiming that the driver's 14th amendment rights were violated because the trooper knowingly engaged in a high-speed chase through the city that he knew was dangerous. The family's lawyer also claims the trooper lied to cover up his role in the crash and did not attempt to render aid once he arrived at the scene.

What Do You Think?

1. Was the trooper doing the wrong thing by pursuing the driver?
2. Was the trooper responsible for the death of the motorist? Does the timing of when the trooper stopped the pursuit bear any relevance?
3. Does the trooper's choice to lie have any bearing in the responsibility for the death of the motorist?
4. What was the supervisor's role in this? Should the trooper be spared punishment because he was following the instructions of the supervisor?
5. Should anyone be punished in this case? Does the driver bear any blame for the accident?
6. Do you believe the driver's family's legal case against the trooper has merit? Explain your answer.

(continued)

Thinking It Over

1. In your opinion, is it possible to avoid a clash of values in public service? Is it desirable?
2. Which values would you include in your own set of core values? Would these provide you with guidance or be a straitjacket on decisions you must make? Why?
3. What is the difference between a responsibility and an obligation? Give examples where you or others have experienced the tension between the two.
4. What do you believe is the link between ethics and power?
5. Describe how you see the low road, high road, and fusions perspectives work in government.