Practicing Ethical Public Leadership

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So . . . What is Ethics?

“moral principles for living and making decisions.”

“the study of what we ought to do.”
The Foundation: Values

That is . . .
Whatever it is that we value
And that is relevant/important to consider

‘Moral values’
Broadly defined
The Values of a Public Servant

Not only what we ourselves value personally

Values associated with our role

- The values of our constituents
- Institutional values
- Public goods for which we have special responsibility
The Role of the Facts on the Ground

Guide us in determining which of our values should be considered

Determine the decision(s) that must be made

Guide us in evaluating the merits of various options
Ethical Principles

Guides to deciding what to do, given our values and the facts on the ground

Methods of applying our values to the facts
Ethical Principles

Character/Virtue  Consequence/Outcome
Duty/Obligation  Care/Relationship
Character/Virtue

Do that which avoids both the extremes of too much and too little.

The “Golden Mean” (Aristotle)
Character/Virtue

Do that which you can justify and for which you are willing to take complete responsibility.

Existentialist (Jean-Paul Sartre)
Ethic of Care

A commitment “to flourishing and growth of individuals, . . . [while] acknowledg[ing] our interconnectedness and interdependence.”

(Maurice Hammington)

“more a characterization of a social relation than the description of an individual disposition.”

(Virginia Held)
Duty

Do that which you would want every person to do, as if required by law.

The “Categorical Imperative” (Immanuel Kant)
Duty

Do unto others what you would have them do unto you.

The “Golden Rule” (Jesus of Nazareth)
Consequentialist

The greatest good for the greatest number, while doing the least harm possible.

Utilitarianism (John Stuart Mill)
Consequentialist

Imagine that you do not know anything about who you are in the society in which the results of your decision are to be experienced. What decision would you choose?

‘Veil of Ignorance’ (John Rawls)
Reason and Intuition

Some ethicists insist that ethics is all ‘in our heads’
  • We must set aside everything except rational thought

Some ethicists insist that an important element of ethics is in our hearts
  • Call it conscience, or intuition, or inspiration, or discernment
  • Something that is not strictly ‘irrational’, but more accurately nonrational
Making Ethical Decisions
Ethical Dilemma

A difficult choice between two or more alternatives, each of which can be defended plausibly in ethical terms

Struggling with doing the right thing, when the right thing is obvious, is *not* an ethical dilemma

It is a **character test**
Case #1 – The Parking Ticket

Fact summary:

• You have parked illegally
• No ‘harm’ has resulted
• A ticket is being written as you approach
• When the officer recognizes you, he/she starts to put the ticket book away.
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• Relevant values???
• Ethical principle???
• Decision and rationale???
Case #2 – Help from an Old Friend

Fact summary:

• You have an old, wealthy and powerful friend in town
• Your adult child is looking for that first career job
• Your friend personally offers him/her an unadvertised position with your friend’s firm
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Case #3 - Renewal

Fact summary:

• A well-funded, well-respected developer proposes a major revitalization project for a blighted area
• In order to implement the project, the city will need to exercise its power of eminent domain
• The residents of the area are unified in their opposition to the project and the threat of the loss of their properties
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• Ethical principle???
• Decision and rationale???
Concluding Thoughts
Ethical Decision Making Involves . . .

Applying relevant values

To the facts of a situation

By means of one or more tested ethical principles
Being an Ethical Public Leader . . .

Requires us to **consider values unique to our role**

Requires us to be able to **explain** our actions so that others can at least understand, if not agree with, our actions

- And see them as the **legitimate acts of a public servant**
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