

DEALING WITH ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION: THE LENS OF ENHANCED DECISION-MAKING MODEL

Joan Nkansaa Nkansah, EdD

School of Education, College of Education and Human Services,
Western Illinois University, Illinois, USA.

Bright Da-Costa Aboagye, EdD

School of Education, College of Education and Human Services,
Western Illinois University, Illinois, USA.

Abstract

Public administrators sometimes find it challenging to make ethical decisions when faced with an ethical situation due to the inability to recognize and assess ethical dilemmas. The daily confrontations with ethical dilemmas and the neglect of moral issues in an organization can feed into the moral stress of public administrators. For this reason, research has established ethical dilemmas as a profound source of moral stress for organizational leaders involved in administrative decision-making. With decision-making being the fundamental responsibility of administrators, the literature proposes several decision-making models, including rational, satisficing, and enhanced unified ethic, to guide administrators in making ethical decisions. This study explored public administration, external and internal controls, administrative ethics, decision-making, and ethical dilemmas and identified decision-making models that administrators can adopt to deal with ethical dilemmas in decision-making. The literature exploration revealed enhanced unified ethics as the most appropriate decision-making model to assist administrators in making ethical decisions. The enhanced unified ethic as a philosophical model gives administrative ethics a practical meaning with an understanding of organizational and behavioral perspectives. Administrators who work in organizations lacking a unified ethic are usually confronted with ethical dilemmas and the inability to make ethical decisions. The study concludes that when administrators acknowledge the value of the unified ethic, they develop the foundation for ethical choices and excellence.

Keywords

*Enhanced Unified Ethic Decision-Making Model,
Ethical Dilemmas,
Public Administration,
Administrative Evil.*

1. Introduction

Administrators or organizational leaders perform several roles, such as planning, staffing, controlling, directing, and organizing, none of which would be possible without making decisions. Therefore, the fundamental responsibility of public administrators is to make decisions (Geuras & Garofalo, 2011). In support of this assertion, R. B. Denhardt (1999) subscribed to decision-making as the most common administrative activity of administrators because the management of organizations requires implicit and explicit decisions.

Individuals making administrative decisions and merely acting appropriately in their organizational roles may be participating in what can critically and reasonably be observed as evil (Adams & Balfour, 2015). Administrative evil may occur when people engage in evil acts with the justification that their actions are for the greater good, and so, do not recognize the consequences of the behavior to others (Adams & Balfour, 2015). Administrators can easily engage in administrative evil and believe their actions are constructive and good. Although can be presented in many forms, the most common administrative evil is individuals unknowingly engaging in acts of evil (Adams & Balfour, 2015).

The actions and decisions of public administrators are justified by their ethical conduct (Butts, 2008). The public uses ethics as a measure to hold public servants accountable for their actions because there are values and morals accepted as the proper way of doing things in society (Butts, 2008). Therefore, public administrators

cannot draw a line whereby they are excused for acting in a manner that corresponds with or demonstrates ethical misconduct.

Ethical dilemmas in administrative decision-making are an issue of concern in the contemporary public sector as administrators are confronted daily with making ethical decisions (Allen, 2012). Ethical dilemmas occur when administrators are unable to recognize and avoid practices that are considered administrative evils. Ethical dilemmas are a profound source of moral stress (Geuras & Garofalo, 2011; Guy, 1991). Geuras and Garofalo (2011) argued that the daily confrontations with ethical dilemmas and the neglect of moral issues in an organization feed into the moral stress of public administrators. According to Geuras and Garofalo (2011) and Wittmer (2000), despite the pressure, conscious or otherwise, an administrator needs to maintain their moral identity as a step toward reducing and avoiding future moral stresses when making ethical decisions.

This study explored public administration, external and internal controls, administrative ethics, decision-making, and ethical dilemmas and identified decision-making models that administrators can adopt to deal with ethical dilemmas in decision-making. The first part of this paper (i.e., literature review) explores public administration and the external and internal controls in public administration. The second part delves into dealing with ethical dilemmas by exploring decision-making models and making recommendations. The paper ends with discussions and conclusions based on the findings from the literature and decision-making model recommendations.

2. Literature Review

Public Administration

Public administration refers to public officials serving communities to effect positive change and advance the common good by managing and implementing government mandates and policies (Rabin et al., 1989). Public officials or administrators are employees at all levels of government working in different departments and agencies. Public officials, including heads of city, county, regional, state and federal departments, are tasked with managing policies and organizing programs that advance the proper functioning of the government (Kettl & Fessler, 2009).

Public administrators are supposed to remain committed to serving the interest of the public. Thus, administrators are expected to establish management values that are efficient and effective (Cooper, 2012; Geuras & Garofalo, 2011). In all events and circumstances, administrators should maintain responsible conduct (Geuras & Garofalo, 2011; Morgan & Kass, 1993). Responsible conduct means ensuring their personal attributes remain consistent with organizational culture and structure as well as the expectations of the public (Cooper, 2012; K. G. Denhardt, 2007).

Possessing the skills for ethical decision-making, for example, is an attribute of a responsible administrator. Administrators should go through training or socialization to cultivate individualized professional ethics based on specific ethical principles (Cooper, 2012; Huberts, 2014). Also, administrators should have a consciously shared cultural sense of right from wrong with other administrators (Cooper, 2012). These ethical standards internalized through experiences guide the actions and behaviors of administrators and keep them responsible (Cooper, 2012; Huberts, 2014).

Additionally, a responsible administrator should have a rational understanding of professional ethics, have the skills to make ethical decisions, and act and behave accordingly (Cooper, 2012). Administrators should be competent agents and focus on fulfilling ethical obligations in all situations (Cooper, 2012; Geuras & Garofalo, 2011). Further, administrators should possess the virtue or character to commit to behaving ethically even when organizational cultural norms support otherwise (Cooper, 2012).

Nonetheless, Cooper (2012) asserted that the absolute reliance on the conscience or moral sense of public administrators to make ethical decisions should be discouraged because it can result in abuses of power. According to Cooper (2012), for administrators to pursue and fulfill the interests of the public, there must be established public reinforcement policies to guide their actions and behaviors and prevent them from becoming self-serving. To promote checks and balances, there should be both a code of ethics as well as ethics legislation guiding the actions and behaviors of public officials (Cooper, 2012).

External and Internal Controls in Public Administration

Cooper (2012) outlined two approaches to upholding responsible and ethical conduct in public sector organizations, namely external and internal controls. External controls refer to the constraints or rules established to monitor the conduct of administrators from outside of the organization (Al Umar & Al Maoud, 2016; Cooper, 2012). External controls can be in the form of legislation, monitoring systems, or regulations (Cooper, 2012). External controls are normally established as a response to a breach of ethical conduct. These controls also serve the purpose of amending legislation in order to strengthen, extend, and maintain ethical conduct in public organizations (Al Umar & Al Maoud, 2016; Cooper, 2012).

Internal controls, on the other hand, involve the use of training, professional socialization, and formal and informal exchange of ideas to nurture and reinforce the values and ethical standards of public administrators (Al Umar & Al Maoud, 2016; Cooper, 2012). Internal controls utilize standards of ethics, concepts, values, and beliefs to manage the ethics of administrators in public organizations (Cooper, 2012; Menzel, 2007). According to Cooper (2012), internal controls should be both general and personal. These controls are general to reflect the unified conduct of all administrators and at the same time personal to inform the personal ethics of individual administrators (Al Umar & Al Maoud, 2016; Cooper, 2012).

Professional codes of ethics are established to educate the members of an organization about their professional obligations (Cooper, 2012; IngramMicro, 2020). Codes of ethics facilitate the ethical behavior of members and discipline them when there is a violation of the code's directives (IngramMicro, 2020). Additionally, codes of ethics inform the public about the roles and responsibilities of public servants, thereby enhancing the integrity of these professions in the eyes of the public (IngramMicro, 2020).

Codes of ethics should be an integral constituent of every organizational culture (Cooper, 2012; IngramMicro, 2020). Public administrators should be aware of the codes associated with their roles and commit to them fully (IngramMicro, 2020). Thus, codes of ethics should not only be considered as administrative formalities with no practical use but rather as dynamic guidelines for making ethical decisions in the organization (Lunday, 2019). Organizations should cultivate the habit of actively promoting their ethical policies in order to fully leverage the associated advantages (IngramMicro, 2020; Lunday, 2019). The International City/County Management Association's (ICMA, 2017) code of ethics is an example of laid down principles that set the standards for association members to conduct themselves ethically and make ethical decisions. The code of ethics outlines the guidelines for demonstrating integrity and competence in public, professional, and personal ethical relationships (Cooper, 2012; ICMA, 2017). The 12-tenet principles are tailored to ensure that organizational structures and goals align with the expected ethical conduct of members (ICMA, 2017; Cooper, 2012). The code of ethics emphasizes the fundamental dos and don'ts for members in their lines of duty. For instance, the primary duty of public officials is to serve the public in all fairness (Geuras & Garofalo, 2011; ICMA, 2017). Therefore, the code requires the actions and behaviors of public officials to reflect equity, transparency, integrity, and stewardship of the public. Additionally, to ensure organizational structures and goals continue to align with the expected ethical conduct of members, the ICMA's code of ethics was amended to include a new set of guidelines that reflect how members should apply the principles to their professional roles (ICMA, 2017).

Internal controls or codes of ethics are developed in public organizations as a way of sustaining ethical conduct even when there are no external controls (Cooper, 2012). External controls or ethics legislation exist to ensure the maintenance of ethics in the personal judgment as well as professional standards of public administrators (Cooper, 2012). Codes of ethics and ethics legislation are relevant to public administration because they are both established to serve a purpose (Cooper, 2012).

In the desire to design and manage an organizational environment that is conducive to ethical behavior, the focus should not be on whether passing laws, amending management controls, and strengthening performance evaluation processes are more effective than promoting counseling, training, professional socialization, and research (Cooper, 2012). The focus should be on how best to integrate the tenets of internal and external controls into a single design that will achieve and sustain responsible conduct in public organizations (Cooper, 2012).

Ethics in Public Administration

Ethics in public administration fundamentally address the duty of administrators as stewards of the public or society (Butts, 2008). Ethics morally justify the actions and decisions of administrators as they fulfill their organizational roles (Butts, 2008). The public views ethics as a measure of accountability through which the actions of public administrators are scrutinized (Butts, 2008). Ethics in the public sector facilitate the creation of a more open climate within the operations of organizations (Butts, 2008). The presence of ethics in the public sector ensures that administrators act in a manner that corresponds with the values and morals that demonstrate proper conduct (Butts, 2008).

Administrative ethics explains the standards of wrong and right prescribing the duties and behaviors of public administrators. Public administration ethics are founded on the premise that individuals motivated by a sense of duty to serve should pursue and assume positions in the public sector (Perry & Wise, 1990). Administrative ethics makes it evident to administrators when they cross the line due to decisions that leave room for conflicts of interest (Butts, 2008). An example is an organizational leader appointing people into office based on personal relationships, which may bring up the question of commitment and allegiance.

Administrative ethics and organizational leadership are inseparable in public service (Geuras & Garofalo, 2011; Northouse, 2001), which is why public administrators carry the responsibility of making ethical decisions and behaving responsibly (Cooper, 2012; Geuras & Garofalo, 2011). According to Cooper (2012), the operational ethics of administrators over time develop the foundation of their character. Thus, for administrators not to develop self-serving ethics, they need to go through a creative process of interacting with colleagues and society because administrators create understanding when they combine practical experiences with abstract thoughts (Cooper, 2012).

Cooper (2012) discussed two faces of irresponsibility in public organizations. Administrators behaving unethically or performing below expectations do not serve the interests of the public, and thus both can be considered irresponsible conduct (Cooper, 2012). For example, an administrator who takes advantage of their position as a public official for personal gain and another who goes around the law instead of adhering to its mandated principles, both deviate from serving the public (Cooper, 2012; Geuras & Garofalo, 2011). Cooper (2012) stated insufficient congruence between external and internal controls is the causing factor for administrators lacking the ability to perform in their organizational roles.

Conflict exists between external and internal controls when the objective and subjective responsibilities of administrators are not in sync (Cooper, 2012). When such a conflict exists in the organization, the workplace becomes conducive to unethical conduct as well as inadequate job performance (Huberts, 2014). For instance, when newly established external control conflicts with long-standing internal control, the deeply internalized values and orientation become an obstacle to the functioning of the new law or regulation (Cooper, 2012). This type of incongruence between the external control and the internal control flouts the new policy, thereby resulting in irresponsible conduct from the administrators involved (Cooper, 2012).

Serving the interest of the public is the mandate of every public official be it an executive director of a nonprofit organization, a council member, or a state-level politician (Butts, 2008; Cooper, 2012; Geuras & Garofalo, 2011). As such, ethics in public service address the responsibility of public officials and serve as a measure of their accountability (Butts, 2008; Cooper, 2012). Therefore, public officials cannot make decisions without taking into consideration the implications for the public (Cooper, 2012; Geuras & Garofalo, 2011). For example, a council member or an executive director of a nonprofit organization cannot use their position of power to hire an individual based on their personal relationship or history (Dunwoody, 2015; Salyer, 2014). Similarly, a state-level politician with the desire to make their constituents happy cannot make decisions that will have adverse implications on society or the public (Butts, 2008; Harvey, 2015).

Decision-Making in Public Administration

Geuras and Garofalo (2011) argued public sector decision-making should be based on ethical principles. In other words, ethical decisions should be made from an ethical standpoint and not merely following the dictates of the law. Making an ethical decision or engaging in ethical behavior requires administrators to reflect on how their decisions and actions impact the public (Butts, 2008). As ascribed by Geuras and Garofalo (2011), ethics means doing the morally right thing and not doing things the right way. Several instances in history (e.g., the Holocaust, the Flint crisis, etc.) are examples of wrong decisions that people made while following laws or policies. In most of these instances, it was later realized, that there could have been a better and morally right way of doing things (Geuras & Garofalo, 2011). Public administrators should, therefore, operate with the perception of what the general public views as correct and not abuse their power because some statutes allow them to do so.

Administrators with no conscious consideration develop their ethical identities from the pattern of decisions made during their careers (Cooper, 2012). It is true administrators cannot entirely make ethical decisions without being influenced by their deeply held personal beliefs (Cooper, 2012; Geuras & Garofalo, 2011). For example, administrators can use their personal relations, such as friendship, as a factor when making a moral decision. Geuras and Garofalo (2011) mentioned a department chair who was willing to sign off on a leave of absence under questionable conditions in order to preserve personal relations with the faculty. The chair supported the leave even though she knew the faculty had no intentions of returning and was going to violate the terms of the agreement (Geuras & Garofalo, 2011). However, through the systematic process of making decisions, administrators cultivate a sense of intuitive judgment, competence, and integrity (Cooper, 2012).

Moreover, administrators sometimes face an ethical decision situation when ethical dimensions or standards, such as honesty, fairness, human dignity, justice, and integrity (Cooper, 2012; Wittmer, 2000), become relevant for consideration while making a choice that will significantly impact other lives. For example, an administrator agreeing to pay an employee according to their personal needs has implications on the values of the organization (Sharp et al., 2010). The decision is a sign of care for the employee but at the expense of rewarding hard work and excellence (Sharp et al., 2010; Wittmer, 2000). The administrator's action maximizes the employee's

loyalty to the organization but also shows a lack of fairness (Cooper, 2012; Sharp et al., 2010). The rules of the organization must apply to all employees equally (Cooper, 2012; Geuras & Garofalo, 2011). Therefore, every individual must be rewarded in proportion to their contribution to productivity regardless of what is going on in their personal lives (Cooper, 2012; Geuras & Garofalo, 2011).

Geuras and Garofalo (2011) asserted that administrators make ethical decisions based on experiences. Cooper (2012) added that administrators in the course of their careers develop ethical identities from the pattern of decisions they make. Geuras and Garofalo (2011) referred to this identity as ethical style and described it as the individual “mix of attitudes, beliefs, and values that make up each one of us and defines the perspective through which we plan and judge our actions and those of others” (p. 196). Through this methodical process of making decisions and discovering ethical standpoints, administrators cultivate standards of ethics and a sense of intuitive judgment (Cooper, 2012).

Furthermore, Geuras and Garofalo (2011) argued administrators should make ethical decisions from a moral point of view. Administrators should possess moral qualities that will facilitate competence and excellence in the conduct of affairs in their organizations (Ciulla, 2009; Geuras & Garofalo, 2011). According to Ciulla (2009), caring, for example, is an essential quality that administrators need to practice in order to maintain the loyalty and ethical conduct of employees at the workplace. Ciulla (2009) defined care as getting actively engaged with employees in reaching organizational goals, paying attention, and being concerned about the needs of workers. Ciulla (2009) established that caring about and taking responsibility for employees should be part of the duties of organizational leaders. Therefore, administrators or organizational leaders should care for their employees and be involved in their lives. However, the care approach as a management strategy can get complicated as leaders in this position could easily get caught up in ethical dilemmas (Ciulla, 2009; Geuras & Garofalo, 2011).

Ethical Dilemmas in Public Administration

Ethical dilemmas are an issue of concern in the contemporary public sector as administrators are confronted daily with making ethical decisions (Allen, 2012). Ethical dilemmas stem from administrators’ ability or inability to recognize and avoid practices that are considered administrative evils. Administrative evils are less obvious activities that inspire and support unethical and awful human behaviors (Jacobs, 2016; Staub, 1992). Administrative evil is characterized by administrators engaging in or contributing to acts of evil while performing their organizational roles, without being cognizant of the evil in their decisions and actions (Adams & Balfour, 2015). Adams and Balfour (2015) argued modern organizations serve as the foothold of administrative evil, with administrators inflicting acts of evil through their routine organizational roles. Modern organizations are structured in a way that information gets diffused and disseminated to different offices at different levels. Thus, it has become more challenging to recognize evil administrative activities.

Administrative evil exists because the culture of technical rationality enables it (Adams & Balfour, 2015). Technical rationality is the application of rational thoughts of positivism to social reality (Papell & Skolnik, 1992). It is the culture of using a scientific analytical mindset to make objective, measurable, and rational explanations as the basis of professionalism (Adams & Balfour, 2015). Technical rationality constitutes two major elements: the scientific analytic mindset and the belief in technical progress (Adams & Balfour, 2015). Modernization continues to increase the value society places on technical rationality, thereby minimizing the emphasis on concepts such as reason and ethics (Adams & Balfour, 2015). Thus, technical rationality creates a professional practice with a limited sense of context resulting in little or no meaningful engagement with the ethical concerns of society. Technical processes and progress generate unintentional tendencies of neglecting human values as the culture encourages the need to obey authority at the expense of others (Adams & Balfour, 2015).

Administrative evil and moral inversion keep challenging the ethical foundations of public administrators as the culture of technical rationality continues to pervade public organizations (Adams & Balfour, 2015; Jacobs, 2016). A moral inversion occurs when something evil or destructive is successfully masked or packaged as something positive and useful (Adams & Balfour, 2015). Moral inversion occurs over an extended period of decision-making as administrators’ concerns for the demands of their roles and responsibilities take precedence over ethical concerns (Jacobs, 2016). The Flint water crisis in the state of Michigan, for example, was more of a moral inversion due to technical rationality (Adams & Balfour, 2015) instead of some misunderstanding or technical and scientific failure (Bernstein, 2016; Newell, 2016). The crisis was a typical example of employees subordinating ethical and moral values over technical compliance during decision-making processes (Adams & Balfour, 2015; Newell, 2016). The actions of the city, state, and government officials demonstrated ethical misconduct (Bernstein, 2016; Butts, 2008). All the officials who could have intervened to prevent or defuse the crisis were shifting the responsibility of taking the initiative (Bernstein, 2016; Newell, 2016). The city kept

denying the crisis, the state kept ignoring the responsibility, and the Environmental Protection Authority kept avoiding the politics of demanding the city and the state do the morally right thing (Newell, 2016). The actions or inactions of the major players resulted in irreversible damage to the water supply pipes (Bernstein, 2016), the city residents' unimaginable exposure to lead for over a year, and the children of residents being diagnosed with lead poisoning (Kennedy, 2016; Ridley, 2016).

When moral inversion sets in, something that is pure evil could even be packaged as something worthwhile (Adams Balfour, 2015). The Michigan Department of Environmental Quality has the primary objective of protecting human health and the environment and yet made decisions that fundamentally threatened the lives of the residents of Flint (Newell, 2016). However, blaming officials and penalizing them for their actions are not enough to prevent administrative evils from occurring (Newell, 2016) because ethical failure or misconduct could persist even when public officials follow laws and regulations to the letter. Therefore, public servants need to understand their duty as stewards of the public and act accordingly (Butts, 2008). Also, administrators need to recognize that administrative evil is ingrained in the culture of public administration. This recognition will reduce the influence of moral inversion on ethical conclusions and enable administrators to design strategies that will best serve the interests of the public (Adams & Balfour, 2015; Cooper, 2012).

Ethical dilemmas in the public sector can be identified in the everyday decision-making processes of administrators (Butts, 2008). Geuras and Garofalo (2011) referenced a case where the chair of a department, being aware that the living situation of two faculty members violates the intent of the nepotism rule did nothing about the situation. The chair could have replaced the old faculty with a younger and more energized faculty at a lesser cost but did not.

Administrators often face ethical dilemmas in the workplace. It takes their developed ethical style to determine whether they would go around the law or adhere to both the letter and intent of the law (Geuras & Garofalo, 2011).

Organizational leaders or administrators are confronted with the challenge of how to be effective and ethical in their work (Ciulla, 2009; Geuras & Garofalo, 2011). There is a high tendency for ethical dilemmas to emerge while taking responsibility and addressing the needs of employees (Ciulla, 2009). For example, leaders can get caught up in a situation that challenges their ethics in an attempt to address the needs of employees (Sharp et al., 2010). A leader's empathy for a situation in an employee's personal life could blindside their position as an ethical and effective leader (Sharp et al., 2010). The employee, on the other hand, may feel entitled to the expectations of their employer to care for their needs and take responsibility for them (Ciulla, 2009). According to Ciulla (2009) and Sharp et al. (2010), employees typically expect from their leaders some level of care and responsibility for their needs, be it personal or professional.

Ethical dilemmas are a profound source of moral stress (Geuras & Garofalo, 2011; Guy, 1991). Selye (1974) argued stress may be good and bad depending on the source, the circumstance, and how it is managed. For instance, a supervisor's confidence in an administrator, although could add to their moral stress, can be classified as good moral stress (Selye, 1974). The idea of disappointing the supervisor is a good motivator for the administrator to stick by their principles and deal with ethical dilemmas that may result in irresponsible conduct (Cooper, 2012; Sharp et al., 2010).

According to Geuras and Garofalo (2011), the daily confrontations with ethical dilemmas and the neglect of moral issues in an organization feed into the moral stress of public administrators. For example, an administrator may find themselves in a dicey situation when the action and behavior of their superior are the cause of their moral stress and ethical dilemma (Geuras & Garofalo, 2011; Sharp et al., 2010). The administrator feels the pressure to please the supervisor for the sake of their job and the anticipation of maintaining a cordial relationship between them (Sharp et al., 2010). It is therefore more challenging when an administrator has to work with a supervisor who not only disregards them but does not value their professional opinion (Cooper, 2012; Sharp et al., 2010), thereby, robbing their conscience and rendering them morally cripple (Geuras & Garofalo, 2011; Sharp et al., 2010). Administrators will continue to be confronted with issues of ethical dilemmas in the workplace. It is entirely up to them to determine whether they would go around the law, adhere to its principles, or apply them with some level of discretion (Adams & Balfour, 2015; Geuras & Garofalo, 2011).

Wuthnow (1996) argued a strategy to get a handle on moral stress is to devise a compelling basis for recognizing moral challenges and acting or making morally legitimate decisions. Despite the pressure, conscious or otherwise, an administrator needs to maintain their moral identity. Fighting to protect moral sense is a step towards reducing and avoiding future moral stresses (Geuras & Garofalo, 2011; Wittmer, 2000).

Dealing with Ethical Dilemmas in Public Administration

An administrator or a leader facing an ethical dilemma needs to object to the unethical situation and act on the matter before it forms their identity and becomes too difficult to change over time (Geuras & Garofalo, 2011; Sharp et al., 2010). The process of dealing with an ethical dilemma will give the administrator insights into their character, personality, and behavior (Geuras & Garofalo, 2011). The process will also cultivate and sustain a personal and professional life that everyone including themselves will be proud of (Cooper, 2012; Geuras & Garofalo, 2011). When an administrator confronts a situation that brings them moral stress and ethical dilemma, it will give them an opportunity to learn and know more about themselves and what they want to accomplish as a leader in public service (Geuras & Garofalo, 2011).

Administrators sometimes find it challenging to make ethical decisions when faced with an ethical situation because they cannot recognize and assess ethical dilemmas (Cooper, 2012; Geuras & Garofalo, 2011). Allen (2012) posited three conditions for recognizing an ethical dilemma confrontation. First, administrators should look out for a situation that calls for them to make a decision concerning the best course of action (Allen, 2012). This situation should, therefore, include making a choice. Second, the situation should present administrators with different courses of action to choose from (Allen, 2012; Cooper, 2012). Last, there should be a compromise of some principle no matter what course of action administrators take (Allen, 2012). It is only when administrators have recognized and assessed ethical dilemmas that they will gain the clarity, experience, and skills relevant to making ethical analyses and judgments (Geuras & Garofalo, 2011).

Furthermore, Cooper (2012) established that sometimes the difficulty for administrators is how to articulate the principles or values that are at risk of violation. In the case of some administrators, their dilemmas may be more practical than ethical (Sharp et al., 2010). Thus, they may tend to focus on pleasing their superiors instead of addressing the ethical issue at hand (Cooper, 2012; Sharp et al., 2010). Researchers, such as Cooper (2012) and Geuras and Garofalo (2011), proposed adopting decision-making models to deal with moral stress and ethical dilemmas.

Decision-Making Models

The fundamental responsibility of public administrators is to make decisions (Geuras & Garofalo, 2011). Administrators perform several roles such as planning, staffing, controlling, directing, and organizing. However, none of these roles would be possible without making decisions (R. B. Denhardt, 1999; Geuras & Garofalo, 2011). To confirm this assertion, R. B. Denhardt (1999) argued the administration and management of organizations require making implicit and explicit decisions and pronounced decision-making as the most common administrative activity.

Since administrators need to maintain a level of competence and integrity in decision-making (Geuras & Garofalo, 2011), the procedure for ethical decision-making should be explicit with no ambiguity and should continually be reinforced to ensure sustainability (Cox, 2004). The decision-making process should require the assessment and accurate interpretation of the situation using an ethical framework that defines the restrictions of administrators' behavior and capacity (Arendt, 2003). In this way, decisions made will be ethical, realistic, and credible (Arendt, 2003; Cox, 2004). Several decision-making models exist to assist administrators in making ethical decisions; this paper focuses on three, rational, satisficing, and enhanced unified ethic.

Rational Decision-Making Model

The rational decision-making model is a systematic process that involves reasoning, facts, and data to make logical decisions (R. B. Denhardt, 1999; Uzonwanne, 2016). Administrators must use objective analysis and reasoning to minimize subjectivity and bias when making rational decisions. First, administrators must define the problem; second, identify decision criteria; third, allocate weights to the criteria, fourth, develop alternatives; fifth, evaluate the alternatives; and sixth, select the best alternative as the course of action. Understanding the key components of the model helps administrators to enhance the quality of the decisions they make (R. B. Denhardt, 1999; Lumen Learning, n.d.; Uzonwanne, 2016).

Cooper (2012) argued that public administrators should adopt a rational approach to ethical decision-making that incorporates description as well as prescription. Public administrators should describe questionable situations and problems from an objective standpoint and void of any personal feelings.

Conversely, Geuras and Garofalo (2011) indicated that the rational decision-making model rarely fits into the everyday activities of decision-making in public organizations as administrators act and behave based on conditions that do not align with the tenets of the rational model (R. B. Denhardt, 1999; Geuras & Garofalo, 2011). R. B. Denhardt (1999) argued the different levels of motivation to solve problems and administrators' care for some problems more than others as the reason for the misalignment.

Satisficing Decision-Making Model

The satisficing decision model, also known as the bounded rationality decision-making model, involves the process of picking the most satisfactory or good enough decision instead of the best one possible (R. B. Denhardt, 1999; WallStreetMojo, 2024). The bounded rationality concept was first proposed by Herbert A. Simon, an American political scientist, in 1957. Simon (1957) argued that people base their decisions on their limited knowledge and cognitive capacity. Thus, administrators do not need all the necessary information to make a rational decision as they can base their decisions on only the information readily available to them. The satisficing or bounded rationality decision-making model is most appropriate when there are time constraints or limited information that does not allow the use of the rational decision-making model. Also, administrators can use the model to preserve mental energy and cut down on costs or expenditures.

R. B. Denhardt (1999) proposed the satisficing decision-making model as more accurate in describing how decisions are made in public organizations. With a satisficing model, administrators make decisions that although not ideal, are good enough and conform to the reality of the organizational environment (R. B. Denhardt, 1999; Geuras & Garofalo, 2011).

Enhanced Unified Ethic Decision-Making Model

The enhanced unified ethics decision-making model applies the unified ethic within an organization. Geuras and Garofalo (2011) defined the unified ethic based on four ethical methodologies, teleology, deontology, intuitionism, and virtue theory or character. Teleology teaches happiness and people producing more happiness to ensure a perfectly ethical society (Cooper, 2012; Geuras & Garofalo, 2011). Deontology defines the principled actions of individuals that affect many aspects of everyday life. Intuitionism subscribes to individuals making decisions based on their own emotions. Virtue theory argues for understanding the decisions of an individual by evaluating the entirety of that person. These four ethical methodologies together create an all-encompassing ethic known as the unified ethic.

The enhanced unified ethic is a decision-making model that integrates clarity, integrity, and consistency into not only administrators' individual decisions but also the organizational process (Cooper, 2012; Geuras & Garofalo, 2011). Organizational power structures and customary practices influence ethical decision-making. Thus, the actions and behaviors of administrators cannot be justified without taking into consideration the factors and forces within an organizational culture (Cooper, 2012; Geuras & Garofalo, 2011). That is why the enhanced unified ethics decision-making model applies the unified ethic within an organization.

Administrators behave and make ethical decisions when aspects of the organizational structure nurture responsible conduct (Cooper, 2012; Geuras & Garofalo, 2011). Thus, the enhanced unified ethic when thoroughly institutionalized applies the organizational unified ethic in every facet of the organizational culture (Cooper, 2012; Geuras & Garofalo, 2011).

Recommended Decision-Making Model

Public administrators in their own right possess the experience and skills relevant to making ethical decisions (Geuras & Garofalo, 2011; Guy, 1991). The essential part missing is for them to recognize how their skills apply to ethical dilemmas and situations (Cooper, 2012; Geuras & Garofalo, 2011). Thus, administrators, in order to serve the public ethically and effectively, need choice, discernment, and the ability to satisfice constructively. Public administrators need an organizational culture in which competence and excellence are routine (Geuras & Garofalo, 2011). This culture provided by the enhanced unified ethic model, guides administrators with the understanding to transition from morally passive to morally active decision makers, which is why we recommend the enhanced unified ethic decision-making model essential in addressing ethical dilemmas in decision-making.

Geuras and Garofalo (2011) affirmed that the enhanced unified ethic within an organization provides a framework for making ethical decisions that are functional. The behavioral framework deepens and broadens the understanding of ethical dimensions and the implications of the ethical decisions of administrators (Geuras & Garofalo, 2011; Guy, 1991). The model reduces moral stress and ethical dilemmas by providing a clear basis for making ethical choices (Geuras & Garofalo, 2011). The enhanced unified ethic as a philosophical model gives administrative ethics a practical meaning with an understanding of organizational and behavioral perspectives (Geuras & Garofalo, 2011; Guy, 1991).

Geuras and Garofalo (2011) and Guy (1991) suggested four steps of the enhanced unified ethic decision-making model when addressing ethical dilemmas and other kinds of ethical situations. First, the administrator needs to interpret the situation (Geuras & Garofalo, 2011; Guy, 1991). The administrator needs to understand who will be affected by the decision, determine the extent to which others will be affected by the decision, and establish whether the situation involves fairness. Nadler and Schulman (2006) noted that one of the most fundamental tenets of ethical decision-making is fairness. Favoritism, nepotism, and cronyism are among the critical issues

that interfere with fairness or equality in the workplace. An example is when an individual is granted a position because of connections rather than experience or credentials. This unethical practice affects transparency, which is central to the contracting processes and hiring of public servants.

Second, the administrator needs to reason and formulate the ethical course of action by answering (Geuras & Garofalo, 2011; Wittmer, 2000). The administrator must analyze the dilemma in terms of their personal values and ethics to generate the ethical course of action. Here, the administrator can note down and brainstorm ideas for the action they will take. Also, the administrator can consult other colleagues to pick their brains on the next course of action.

Third, the administrator needs to make a choice based on the values of their organization's unified ethic (Geuras & Garofalo, 2011; Wittmer, 2000). The administrator must analyze the dilemma in terms of the ethical principles of the organization. The administrator needs to determine the principles that apply and those that have priority in this case. Also, the administrator can consult with supervisors for other points of view. The organization's ethics committee is another resource that can be consulted for input.

Last, the administrator needs to implement the chosen ethical course of action (Geuras & Garofalo, 2011; Guy, 1991). Before deciding on the action, the administrator must consider all options in context and evaluate the positive and negative effects of each relative to the ethical principles they have identified. Also, the administrator must evaluate each action for the potential effects on everyone who will be affected by the decision. These measures will help with eliminating problematic options and deciding on the one that best fits the situation. When the components of the different steps have been properly implemented, an administrator will be on the right course to making an ethical decision (Geuras & Garofalo, 2011; Guy, 1991; Wittmer, 2000).

We believe the enhanced decision-making model is essential in addressing ethical dilemmas because the model is an application of the unified ethic within an organizational context. The unified ethic is an approach to dealing with moral stress and ethical dilemmas (Geuras & Garofalo, 2011). A unified ethic is a holistic point of view that links administrators' beliefs, wants, and identities (Geuras & Garofalo, 2011). When an organization has a unified ethic embedded in the culture of the organization, administrators or leaders realize the interdependence between purpose, principle, and character (Geuras & Garofalo, 2011; Sharp et al., 2010). Thus, leaders would be able to make decisions with a more extensive ethical understanding of moral stress, dilemmas, and other ethical situations (Cooper, 2012; Geuras & Garofalo, 2011; Sharp et al., 2010).

The unified ethic of an organization reflects its inherent unity of human nature (Geuras & Garofalo, 2011; Guy, 1991). The approach combines three moral positions that administrators value, namely, teleology, deontology, and character or virtue theory (Cooper, 2012; Geuras & Garofalo, 2011). First, administrators value deontology because organizational principles appeal to their nature and their need for consistency. Second, administrators also value teleology because of their desire for happiness for themselves and others. Third, administrators value the virtue perspective because character invokes their respect for excellence. These three positions together form a practical perspective for facing administrative ethical challenges (Cooper, 2012; Geuras & Garofalo, 2011). Thus, the combination of the three moral positions provides the basis for ethical restitution and reformation in public organizations.

The acknowledgment of the value of the unified ethic is the foundation of ethical choices and excellence (Cooper, 2012; Geuras & Garofalo, 2011). Administrators who work in organizations lacking a unified ethic usually find themselves confronted with ethical dilemmas and the inability to make ethical decisions (Geuras & Garofalo, 2011; Guy, 1991). Geuras and Garofalo (2011) indicated that the first step for administrators to make ethical decisions is to develop an understanding of the imminent ethical conflicts or dilemmas in the work environment. This understanding can be achieved when administrators are equipped with the sensitivity to recognize ethical conflicts and assess them from the viewpoint of values that promote ethical actions and decisions (Guy, 1991). In other words, internalizing personal responsibility will increase administrators' individual and organizational accountability (Geuras & Garofalo, 2011; Guy, 1991).

Administrators' ability to make ethical decisions means they have developed the skills for ethical analysis and judgment (Geuras & Garofalo, 2011). Wittmer (2000), argued every managerial decision, ethical or otherwise, involves making a choice and affecting the lives of others. Therefore, the ability of administrators to make decisions with significant impact on themselves and the welfare of others constitutes only one aspect of an ethical decision situation. To Wittmer (2000), the other constituents of an ethical decision situation are the values or standards of ethics that guide the decision-making process.

3. Discussions and Conclusion

Administrative ethics and leadership are inseparable because leaders and managers carry the responsibility of ethical decisions and responsible conduct (Cooper, 2012; Geuras & Garofalo, 2011; Northouse, 2001).

Administrators and managers in public service need to recognize and uphold their duty of stewardship (Cooper, 2012; Northouse, 2001). However, the public should not rely on the conscience or moral sense of administrators alone to commit them to their public mandate (Cooper, 2012). This kind of absolute reliance could result in the abuse of power. Through internal controls, such as codes of ethics, established public reinforcement policies will guide the actions and behaviors of public servants and prevent them from deviating from their public obligations (Cooper, 2012; Geuras & Garofalo, 2011).

Public administrators must strive to always be the primary agents of trust, accountability, and efficiency (Adams & Balfour, 2015; Cooper, 2012; Geuras & Garofalo, 2011). In the midst of moral stress, ethical dilemmas, and other ethical situations, administrators need to maintain a level of responsiveness, equity, integrity, and accountability (Cooper, 2012; Geuras & Garofalo, 2011). Administrators, therefore, need to work with a moral framework, such as the enhanced unified ethic, that will assist them in dealing with moral stress, ethical dilemmas, and other situations they are confronted with daily (Cooper, 2012; Geuras & Garofalo, 2011).

Every organization should have a code of ethics that sets the standards for how employees or administrators conduct themselves and make ethical decisions (Cooper, 2012). As the laid down principles for responsible conduct, the code of ethics will detail the guidelines for demonstrating integrity and competence in public, professional, and personal ethical relationships (Cooper, 2012). The principles of the code will be tailored to ensure organizational structures and goals align with the expected ethical conduct of administrators (Cooper, 2012). The code, then, will emphasize the duty of public officials to serve the public in all fairness (Cooper, 2012; Geuras & Garofalo, 2011).

Administrators in public service should assume an approach to ethical decision-making that creates a platform to describe ethical situations and problems from an objective standpoint without the interference of personal obligations (Cooper, 2012; Geuras & Garofalo, 2011). A decision-making model such as the enhanced unified ethic gives administrators the understanding that values and ethics are the accepted way of doing things in public administration (Butts, 2008; Geuras & Garofalo, 2011). With such a measure in place, public managers, for instance, cannot draw a line whereby they will be excused for irresponsible conduct (Butts, 2008; Cooper, 2012; Sharp et al., 2010). Administrators working in the capacity of stewardship have to make responsible decisions that protect the public's interest.

Furthermore, the principles and values of administrators are embedded in their personal and professional pursuits (Cooper, 2012; Geuras & Garofalo, 2011). Moreover, these pursuits are the foundation of administrators' character, sense of purpose, and happiness (Adams & Balfour, 2015; Cooper, 2012; Geuras & Garofalo, 2011). The moral lives of administrators reside in community and relationships because administrators are moral collaborators (Cooper, 2012; Geuras & Garofalo, 2011). Thus, the moral identity of an administrator implicates those of other administrators in the community (Geuras & Garofalo, 2011). Administrators need to acknowledge the moral identities of one another and assist in nurturing each other's moral capacity to trust and collaborate irrespective of their status in the organization.

Public administrators are supposed to remain committed to establishing management values that are efficient and effective (Cooper, 2012; Geuras & Garofalo, 2011). However, this commitment, although may seem straightforward, creates ambiguity, uncertainty, and complexity, thereby creating moral stress and ethical dilemmas (Geuras & Garofalo, 2011; Morgan & Kass, 1993). The reason is that the interest of the public, in itself, is ambiguous and lends itself to different interpretations. Public interest sometimes refers to the community or constitutional values, the collective interests of the underrepresented, or even the obligation to future generations. In all these events and circumstances, administrators must perform their duty of serving the public interest.

References

- Adams, G. B., & Balfour, D. L. (2015). *Unmasking administrative evil* (3rd ed.) Routledge.
- Al Umar, F. A., & Al Maoud, B. A. (2016). Internal/external control of the public endowment organizations. *Endowment / Awqaf*, (31), 15–57.
- Allen, A. (2012). What is an ethical dilemma? *The New Social Worker*. http://www.socialworker.com/feature-articles/ethics-articles/What_Is_an_Ethical_Dilemma%3F/
- Arendt, H. (2003). *Responsibility and judgment*. Schocken Press.
- Bernstein, L. (2016, February 17). Lawmakers tell both EPA head, Michigan governor to step down over Flint crisis. *The Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/michigan-governor-to-blame-state-environmental-agency-for-flint-water-debacle/2016/03/16/ded09d3a-ebbe-11e5-b0fd-073d5930a7b7_story.html

- Butts, J. B. (2008). Ethics in organizations and leadership. Jones and Bartlett.
- Ciulla, J. B. (2009). Leadership and the ethics of care. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 88(1), 3–4. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10551-009-0105-1>
- Cooper, T. L. (2012). *The responsible administrator: An approach to ethics for the administrative role* (5th ed.). John Wiley & Sons.
- Cox, R. W., III. (2004). On being an effective local government manager. In Newell (Ed.) *The effective local government manager* (3rd ed., pp. 1–19). ICMA.
- Denhardt, K. G. (2007). The management of ideals: A political perspective on ethics. *International Journal of Public Administration*, 20(4–5), 1091–1115. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01900699708525239>
- Denhardt, R. B. (1999). *Public administration: An action orientation* (3rd ed.). Harcourt Brace College Publishers.
- Dunwoody, D. (2015, August 10). The city of Pensacola COO resigns. WUWF. <http://wuwf.org/post/city-pensacola-coo-resigns#stream/0>
- Geuras, D., & Garofalo, C. (2011). *Practical ethics in public administration* (3rd ed.). Management Concepts.
- Guy, M. E. (1991). Using high reliability management to promote ethical decision making. In J. S. Bowman (Ed.) *Ethical frontiers* (pp. 185–204). Jossey-Bass.
- Harvey, S. (2015). Sustainability plans. Green Plus. <http://gogreenplus.org/nuts-and-bolts-guide/performance-nuts-and-bolts-guide/sustainability-management/sustainability-plans/>
- Huberts, L. (2014). *The integrity of governance: What it is, what we know, what is done, and where to go*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ingram Micro. (2020). Supplier code of ethics and declaration of responsible business practices. https://usa.ingrammicro.com/media/Documents/ingrammicro/c/corpcomm/Supplier-Declaration_web.pdf
- International City/County Management Association. (2017). ICMA code of ethics with guidelines. <https://icma.org/documents/icma-code-ethics-amended-june-2017>
- Jacobs, R. M. (2016). Fending off administrative evil. *PA Times*. <https://patimes.org/fending-administrative-evil/>
- Kennedy, M. (2016, April 20). Lead-laced water in Flint: A step-by-step look at the makings of a crisis. National Public Radio. <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/04/20/465545378/lead-laced-water-in-flint-a-step-by-step-look-at-the-makings-of-a-crisis>
- Kettl, D., & Fessler, J. (2009). *The politics of the administrative process*. CQ Press Lumen Learning. (n.d.). Principles of management. <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/wm-principlesofmanagement/chapter/rational-decision-making-vs-other-types-of-decision-making/>
- Lunday, J. (2019, July 21). Managing the workplace ethics of social media. *Corporate Compliance Insights*. <https://www.corporatecomplianceinsights.com/managing-the-workplace-ethics-of-social-media/>
- Menzel, D. C. (2007). *Ethics management for public administrators: Building organizations of integrity*. Sharpe.
- Morgan, D. F., & Kass, H. D. (1993). The American odyssey of the career public service: The ethical crisis of role reversal. In H. G. Frederickson (Ed.) *Ethics and public administration* (pp. 177–190). M.E. Sharpe.
- Nadler, J., & Schulman, M. (2006, October 23). Favoritism, cronyism, and nepotism. <https://www.scu.edu/government-ethics/resources/what-is-government-ethics/favoritism-cronyism-and-nepotism/>
- Newell, T. (2016, February 23). Failure in Flint: The moral responsibility of Public Servants. *Huffington Post*. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/terry-newell/failure-in-flint-the-moral-responsibility-of-public-servants_b_9298824.html
- Northouse, P. (2001). *Leadership: Theory and practice* (2nd ed.). Sage.
- Papell, C., & Skolnik, L. (1992). The reflective practitioner: A contemporary paradigm's relevance for social work education. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 28(1), 18–26.
- Perry, J. L., & Wise, L. R. (1990). The motivational bases of public service. *Public Administration Review*, 50, 367–373. <https://doi.org/10.2307/976618>

- Rabin, J., Hildreth, W. B., & Miller, G. J. (Eds.). (1989). Handbook of public administration. Marcel Dekker.
- Ridley, G. (2016, March 17). Gov. Snyder concedes Flint water was a failure of the emergency manager system. MLive. http://www.mlive.com/news/flint/index.ssf/2016/03/emergency_management_failed_fl.html#incart_special-report
- Salyer, S. (2014, July 22). Mukilteo mayor defends the hiring of the state senator to the city job. The Herald of Everett, Washington. <http://www.heraldnet.com/article/20140722/NEWS01/140729709>
- Selye, H. (1974). Stress without distress. Lippincott.
- Sharp, B.S., Aguirre, G., & Kickham, K. (2010). Managing in the public sector: A casebook in ethics and leadership (1st ed.). Routledge.
- Simon, H. A. (1957). Models of man: Social and rational - Mathematical essays on rational human behavior in a social setting. John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Staub, E. (1992). The origins of aggression and the creation of positive relations among groups. In S. Staub & P. Green (Eds.), Psychology and social responsibility: Facing global challenges (pp. 89–120). New York University Press.
- Uzonwanne, F. C. (2016). Rational model of decision making. In A. Farazmand (Eds.), Global encyclopedia of public administration, public policy, and governance (pp. 1–6). Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-31816-5_2474-1
- WallStreetMojo. (2024). Bounded rationality. <https://www.wallstreetmojo.com/bounded-rationality/>
- Wittmer, D. P. (2000). Ethical decision making. In T. L. Cooper (Ed.) Handbook of administrative ethics (2nd ed., pp.349–372). Routledge.
- Wuthnow, R. (1996). Poor Richard's principle. Princeton University Press.