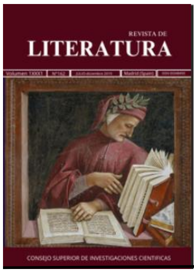

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Executive Ethics in the Digital Age

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Abstract

This article aims to examine the essential ethical principles required for public administrators in the digital age. The study found that administrators across all sectors must manage to encompass the key functions of planning, organizing, leading, controlling, and monitoring, including change management and collaborative networking, in order to achieve organizational efficiency. Crucially, they must adhere to ethical principles in their decision-making processes prior to any operational undertakings, ensuring that the resulting actions are correct, legitimate, and aligned with the prevailing societal morality and values. The cornerstone principle of being an ethical public administrator is the steadfast commitment to upholding the duties of honesty, responsibility, transparency, equality, fairness, and respect for the rule of law. These ethical principles are rooted in the philosophical frameworks of utilitarianism, deontology, virtue ethics, social contract theory, rights-based ethics, and ethical economics, which collectively shape the normative foundations of public administration in the digital age, where digital technologies have enhanced efficiency and facilitated administrative processes. However, the study emphasizes that robust ethical guidelines and regulations must be in place to ensure transparency, accountability, fairness, personal data protection, ethical decision-making, digital skills development, and meaningful stakeholder participation. Furthermore, public administrators must adhere to the ethical principles of morality, integrity, fairness, and respect for individual rights, while also fostering ethically-grounded innovation to build socially responsible and sustainable public organizations in the digital era.

Keywords: Ethics, Public Sector Leadership, Digital Age, Administrative Ethics, Public Administrators

Introduction

The management of any organization requires administrators to fulfill key responsibilities, including planning, organizing, leading, and controlling/monitoring (POLC; Fayol, 1916). In the planning function, administrators must define the organization's goals, vision, and mission, then formulate strategic and operational plans

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that are aligned with anticipated business trends and opportunities. For public sector administrators, this also entails forecasting national, social, and community development trends and prospects.

The organizing function necessitates administrators to ensure that plans can be realized and goals achieved, which involves structuring the organization, delegating authority and responsibilities, managing human resources (e.g., job assignments, cultural development), and so on. The leading function requires administrators to inspire and direct employee efforts, manage internal relationships and communications, make complex decisions, and solve problems. The controlling and monitoring function enables administrators to ensure organizational performance is not deviating from intended goals, through performance evaluation, process improvements, budget control, and resource optimization.

Furthermore, administrators must be cognizant that the administrative environment is constantly changing, thus necessitating effective change management, leveraging new technologies and innovations, risk management, and crisis response. Crucially, administrators must also facilitate the organization's growth, acceptance, and collaboration within the broader society and marketplace through networking and cooperative engagement, both domestically and internationally, as well as by cultivating the organization's brand and reputation.

Fundamentally underpinning an administrator's ability to successfully execute these multifaceted responsibilities is the imperative of ethical conduct (Ethics) in administration. Ethical principles are the bedrock for garnering trust from employees, subordinates, and society, whether in the public or private sector. In the digital age, where technology plays a pivotal role, administrators must operate with responsibility and transparency, considering ethical issues related to data usage, personal data security, and unbiased, conflict-of-interest-free decision-making. Ethical administration enhances organizational efficiency and sustainability while instilling confidence among all stakeholders. Consequently, administrators must continuously develop their skills and adapt to the rapidly evolving standards of the business and social landscape. This article aims to examine the essential ethical principles required for administrators in the digital age, through an analysis of relevant literature and scholarly works, to provide guidance for transparent and socially responsible administration.

Meaning of Ethics

Ethics are employed as the standards of duty and conduct for administrators and professionals in both the public and private sectors. To properly apply ethics in one's professional responsibilities, it is necessary to understand the meaning of the term "ethics". The word "ethics" is derived from the combination of two words: "Jareeyaa" and "Tham".

"Jareeyaa" refers to behavior, conduct, lifestyle, or characteristic behaviors that reflect an individual's inherent disposition or tendencies. "Tham" denotes moral precepts, principles, or the rules of morality. Therefore, ethics signifies the moral principles or standards that guide an individual's conduct and decision-making in living their life, in accordance with the values of society (Phra Payutto, 2016).

In other words, ethics are the moral standards or criteria that determine what is right or wrong, good or bad, in human behavior. They serve as a framework for making appropriate decisions and actions based on the values and norms of society. Ethics can be applied to various domains, such as medical ethics, which upholds the principle of non-maleficence (do no harm) towards patients, or business ethics, which emphasizes integrity and fairness in business practices.

The Cambridge Dictionary (2025) defines ethics as the study of what is morally right or wrong, or a set of beliefs about what is morally right or wrong. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy describes ethics as a branch of philosophy that examines the concepts of moral value, the principles of good and evil, and the duties and responsibilities of humans.

Hence, ethics can be understood as the moral standards or criteria established by society that determine what is right or wrong, good or bad, in human behavior. They provide a guiding framework for decision-making and conduct that aligns with the moral values and norms of society, grounded in the principles of morality. For any enterprise to be accepted by society, its actions must not conflict with the moral correctness and legitimacy of ethics.

For instance, business ethics encompass the moral principles and codes of conduct that govern how a business should operate, such as: 1) Integrity, which involves conducting business with honesty and transparency; 2) Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), considering the impact on society, the environment, and stakeholders; 3) Fairness and Justice in the treatment of employees, customers, and business partners; 4) Stakeholder Responsibility, prioritizing the interests of customers, employees, partners, shareholders, and the community; and 5) Compliance with Laws and Regulations. When a business adheres to these ethical principles, its products and services are likely to be safe, of high quality, and fairly compensated, without the use of child labor or illegal practices, and without engaging in bribery or corruption. Business ethics help build trust in the organization and contribute to long-term success, as customers and consumers can have confidence in the ethical conduct of the business.

Administrative ethics (or public sector ethics) refer to the moral principles, values, and standards that guide and regulate the behavior of individuals working in the public sector or various organizations. Administrators with management responsibilities must uphold these principles, which include: 1) Integrity, conducting operations with honesty and without corruption; 2) Accountability, taking responsibility for their decisions and actions; 3) Transparency, openly disclosing verifiable information to the public; 4) Fairness and Equity, treating everyone equally; and 5) Adherence to the Rule of Law and Ethical Conduct, following the law and professional ethical standards.

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Embracing ethics in administration helps reduce corruption, build public trust, promote efficient and sustainable management, and foster a positive organizational culture-the foundation for effective employee performance.

Philosophical Concepts Related to Administrative Ethics

The philosophical concepts related to administrative ethics help administrators develop a conceptual framework for making correct, fair, and socially beneficial decisions. Administrators can choose the appropriate concepts based on the specific administrative situations in different types of organizations. The relevant philosophical concepts in administration are as follows:

1. Utilitarianism (Bentham, 2007 & Mill, 1998): This concept holds that administrators should judge the rightness or wrongness of an action based on its outcomes, aiming to generate the "greatest good for the greatest number." It can be applied in administration by considering efficiency and societal impact. For example, when public sector administrators need to decide on expanding operations to rural areas with large populations but limited resources and infrastructure, the utilitarian approach would evaluate the long-term economic consequences. If the expansion creates significant new employment opportunities that improve the living standards of the local population by reducing unemployment and increasing household incomes, the administrators may view it positively. However, they must also consider the environmental impact, and if the expansion causes severe environmental degradation, they may need to find alternatives that minimize such negative effects. Ultimately, the utilitarian approach requires administrators to consider the sustainability of the development, ensuring that the long-term interests of the community and economy are protected. While the utilitarian framework focuses on maximizing benefits for the majority, it may face challenges such as environmental risks, resource constraints, or opposition from deontological groups emphasizing adherence to existing rules and regulations. Nevertheless, the utilitarian concept helps administrators choose the course of action that creates the highest value for society as a whole.

2. Deontology: This ethical framework, developed by Immanuel Kant (1785), emphasizes the importance of adhering to duties and rules, rather than considering the outcomes of actions. The central tenet is the "Categorical Imperative," which states that a morally correct action must be universalizable and respect the inherent dignity of human beings, not using them merely as means to an end. This principle aligns with the fourth precept in Buddhism, or the requirement for teachers to follow the prescribed curriculum regardless of how students apply the knowledge. In the management context, deontology means strictly following regulations and treating everyone fairly, prioritizing principles over outcomes.

3. Virtue Ethics: Developed by Aristotle (384–322 BCE), this approach focuses on cultivating the moral character of leaders, such as courage, justice, and practical wisdom. Good administrators must embody these virtues to foster a positive organizational culture and truly ethical leadership, emphasizing the internal development of individuals rather than solely adhering to rules or outcomes. Virtuous leaders will naturally do the right thing, not because of external regulations or rewards. In the management context, the virtues of leaders are crucial, as they shape the organization's direction and influence the values of personnel. Key virtues include:

a) Courage: Administrators must have the courage to make decisions and face challenges, even with risks involved, such as a manager who boldly restructures the organization to improve efficiency despite some resistance.
b) Justice: Administrators must treat personnel fairly and equitably, such as basing promotion opportunities on merit and performance rather than personal relationships.
c) Practical Wisdom: Administrators must use sound judgment in decision-making, considering both principles and situational factors, such as carefully evaluating the organizational and ethical implications of a project that will impact the community. Administrators not only need to embody these virtues but also build an organizational culture rooted in ethics. When leaders consistently practice ethical behavior, they earn credibility and automatically inspire personnel to follow suit, leading to a strong and ethical organization. Administrators can promote virtue in the organization by: 1) serving as positive role models who steadfastly uphold ethics and integrity, 2) establishing transparent and fair systems that build trust, and 3) instilling an ethical mindset through training and fostering a virtues-oriented organizational culture. Organizations driven by genuine virtue are likely to achieve long-term stability and success, earning societal trust, as virtuous leaders command respect, unlike those who hold positions but lack ethics.

In summary, administration grounded in ethics and moral principles is the key to sustainable progress.

4. Social Contract Theory: The Social Contract Theory suggests that leaders or managers, before managing any enterprise, should establish agreements with stakeholders and interested parties. Prominent philosophers associated with this theory include John Locke (1689), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762), and Thomas Hobbes (1651), who proposed that management should respect mutual agreements between leaders and the populace or workforce. Managers must consider everyone's rights and refrain from abusing power, promoting good governance and corporate social responsibility. Management applications of social contract theory encompass:

a) Stakeholder Agreements: Companies that prioritize environmental, social, and governance (ESG) aspects often establish clear environmental and social policies to benefit all stakeholders. In public projects, governments should conduct public hearings or referendums.
b) Respect for Rights and Interests: Companies like Google, Microsoft, and Siam Cement Group emphasize environmental and social concerns, focusing on

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employee welfare through educational scholarships and work-life balance initiatives.

c) Transparency and Accountability: Public companies must disclose financial reports and information on environmental and social impacts. Government entities are required to disclose information under the Official Information Act of 1997.

d) Social and Environmental Responsibility: Examples include Tesla, which focuses on electric vehicles to mitigate environmental issues, and manufacturers producing energy-efficient appliances. Implementing social contract theory in management involves establishing fair agreements, respecting rights, fostering transparency, and maintaining societal responsibility, thereby ensuring organizational sustainability and building public trust.

5. Rights-Based Ethics: Developed by John Rawls (1971), Rights-Based Ethics emphasizes fairness in resource and opportunity distribution. This approach in management and organizations focuses on equality and the underprivileged, aiming for social justice and individual rights protection. Rawls's theory is encapsulated in "principles of justice," comprising two main tenets:

a) Equality: Everyone should have equal rights and freedom to access resources and opportunities, such as education, healthcare, and employment.

b) Assistance to the underprivileged: Granting resources and opportunities to underprivileged individuals for equal development opportunities.

Examples of leaders who have embraced these principles include Thaksin Shinawatra's 30-baht healthcare policy and Nelson Mandela's fight against apartheid in South Africa. These leaders demonstrate a commitment to social justice and equal opportunities, ensuring everyone can access resources fairly.

6. Ethical Economics: Amartya Sen's Ethical Economics highlights the importance of societal impact over mere profit. Sen argues that economics should focus on equity, freedom, and well-being, rather than just GDP. He critiques mainstream economics for ignoring social factors such as inequality and poverty and advocates for a "Capability Approach," focusing on human potential and choice expansion.

Prominent leaders like Mahathir Mohamad, former Prime Minister of Malaysia, and Shinzo Abe, former Prime Minister of Japan, have policies reflecting these principles, balancing economic growth and societal well-being. Sen's approach suggests that economics must consider ethical considerations, justice, and quality of life, and this view is echoed by leaders striving for a balance between economic expansion and public welfare.

Different philosophical perspectives guide managerial decision-making and operations. Managers' adherence to particular ethical principles is shaped by personal experiences and socialization. Business leaders often prioritize profitability, yet current trends incorporate Ethical Economics to balance profits with social responsibility. Leaders like Elon Musk and

Tim Cook exemplify this blend, innovating with environmental consciousness while maintaining profitability.

In public administration, operational managers may follow deontological ethics or rights-based utilitarianism, focusing on laws and fair public service. Policy-level leaders might lean towards utilitarianism and social contract theory, prioritizing societal outcomes over strict adherence to regulations. Philosophical differences can cause conflicts, such as delays in public infrastructure projects or disputes over environmental policies. Understanding these philosophies aids in finding balance between organizational interests, legal frameworks, and societal needs, ultimately enhancing management effectiveness.

Ethics of Management in the Digital Era

The management of organizations in the digital era has become increasingly complex due to the vast use of technology and data. This complexity necessitates adjustments in management ethics to align with the changing context. Digital-era management ethics must now address several critical aspects:

1) **Transparency and Accountability:** Managers must disclose necessary information to stakeholders transparently while ensuring decisions are verifiable, supported by clear data and reasoning. They must take responsibility for the impacts of technologies such as AI and Big Data.
2) **Privacy and Data Protection:** Compliance with data security standards is crucial, especially with regulations like the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and Personal Data Protection Act (PDPA). Organizations must not violate employee or customer rights through unauthorized data collection, and robust cybersecurity measures must be in place.
3) **Fairness and Non-Discrimination:** Technologies and AI should be used fairly, avoiding biases or inequalities. All employees and stakeholders should have equal opportunities, preventing technology from being used for exploitation or oppression.
4) **Integrity and Accuracy of Information:** There must be procedures to verify information accuracy before use in decision-making. Avoid the dissemination of false information or distortion of facts, and cultivate an organizational culture that values data integrity.
5) **Ethical Decision-Making:** Organizations should use ethical principles as guidelines for technology application, such as refraining from using AI in ways that violate human rights. Long-term decision impacts on organizations, society, and the environment should be considered, fostering a culture that respects individual dignity and rights.
6) **Digital Literacy and Ethical Awareness:** Encourage management and employees to understand the ethical impacts of technology. Train employees in appropriate digital practices, incorporating ethical considerations in the development and use of innovations.

7) **Social Responsibility and Sustainability:** Technology should be used to create societal value rather than solely for profit. Implement measures to reduce the environmental impact of technology use and support initiatives that ensure equitable technological access.

In summary, while the ethics of management in the digital era present complexity and challenges, they are crucial for building stable organizations that earn societal trust. Effective managers must adapt to technological changes and adhere to ethical principles for organizational and societal sustainability.

Digital-era management ethics encompass complexity and challenges but are essential for fostering a stable and trusted organization. Managers must adapt to technological changes while adhering to ethical principles to ensure organizational and societal sustainability. Managers in the digital era should embrace virtue and duty-based ethical philosophies, focusing on transparency, responsibility, fairness, respect for personal rights, human ethics, innovation ethics, integrity, and creating socially responsible organizations for sustainable growth in a digital world.

Summary

Managers across all sectors, whether in government, private industry, or non-profit organizations, carry extensive responsibilities that encompass planning, organizing, leading, controlling, and monitoring, alongside managing change and fostering collaborative networks. To effectively fulfill these responsibilities, ethical principles must guide decision-making processes to ensure correctness, fairness, and alignment with societal morals and values.

The degree of commitment to ethical management can vary based on individual perspectives and the characteristics of the organization. Core principles for ethical managers include honesty, accountability, transparency, equality, and justice, alongside respect for laws and moral ethics. These ethical guidelines are anchored in various philosophical frameworks, including utilitarianism, deontological ethics, virtue ethics, social contract theory, rights-based ethics, and ethical economics.

In the digital era, where technology significantly enhances operational efficiency, the associated complexities and social implications necessitate robust ethical regulations governing its application. Key ethical principles pertinent to this context include transparency and accountability, data protection, fairness and non-discrimination, data integrity, ethical decision-making, development of digital competencies, and active social participation. Additionally, managers operating in the digital landscape must adhere to principles of honesty, justice, respect for individual rights, and the encouragement of ethical innovation to cultivate socially responsible organizations, thereby ensuring stability and sustainability in the digital era.

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