

**Leadership Secrets of Local Government Human Resources Officials**  
**Why Ethics Based Leadership Is Vital To the Foundation of Public Sector Organizations**

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Ethics based leadership is a formal approach to guiding organizations that is comprised of a tapestry of both words and images. This complex mosaic is the most proactive foundation upon which an exemplary government organizational infrastructure can be built. To operate without this carefully crafted internal scaffold of composite values is like trying to inspire people to follow a tenuous leader who possesses no personal belief in the product or service that her company is selling. In the realm of public sector work the primary commitment to the reasons for public service – serving citizens - is lost amidst a dreary landscape of bureaucratic malaise and excuses for mediocrity without ethics based leadership as its basis. Telling at best and obvious to all observers, the leader’s efforts are merely based upon drill and simply executed to insure continued personal remuneration.

Devoid of limitations, an ethics based leadership framework presupposes a consistent and easily explainable sense of both institutional identity and integrity. The ethics based organization reflects the inner workings of what constitutes a fully integrated and purposeful structure at each and every level. In turn, this can provide an isolated snapshot at any point in time of an intensity of purpose that makes up each moment of well orchestrated precision regarding decision making at the most fundamental and crucial levels of organizational development. Discounting any significant neutralizers within an organization, a carefully executed and meaningfully developed *ethics based leadership initiative* can serve to provide the mandatory under girding for decisions that are neither popular nor easy.

In addressing the necessity for ethics based leadership, it is easiest to quantify the human resource related reasons in the form of a list of logical rhetoric that serves as the framework for reasoned and lifetime debate. The application of ethics based leadership and subsequent ethics based decision making is most readily facilitated by a process of guided topics and questions. These topics and guided questions help the human resources professional apply the courage to reveal organizational issues that are churning, but often unlabeled, under the most controversial of circumstances. Having the courage to open a ‘debate for deliberate inquiry’ requires an organizational environment devoid of punishment and inclusive of appreciation for the most diverse and contradictory opinions. To set the stage for welcoming this type of discord requires levels of sophisticated maturity coupled with healthy self esteem among both the formal and informal levels of an organization’s leadership.

As previously stated, the development of a plan for ethics based leadership can be effectively shaped through the use of a variety of guided topics and tenets. The key ambassadors for ethics driven practices, policies and determinants in the public sector must be the internal human resources department. By natural default the human resources area is managing, either through proactive or reactive actions the internal climate and culture of the entire organization. If the human resources

function is deemed only a 'tool' of executive management, rather than a full partner in the strategic execution of the organization, the role of the function is relegated to one of *transactions*, both by paper and by cyberspace. This type of role is historically based, dating to the earliest of work in personnel management and can be found as a deep and abiding part of our industry's history. It is however, limiting by its very nature and often a change in this type of assignment on the organizational chart requires an HR champion, (usually the HR executive) to aggressively fight for a change in perspective and placement for the entire function. Long gone are the days of simple paper collection and compliance measurement as the primary focus of what all staff in the internal HR Department are relegated to handle. Internal customers no longer need the hand holding of HR staff seated inside selection and oral board interviews, or handling the super charged reference checking process that gets beyond the surface and links the likelihood of a successful match for candidates to the current political capacity inside an organization.

The human resources function is now the most critical strategist for the success of a blended public sector multi-generational workforce that constitutes not only the U.S. labor pool, but the greater global talent bench. The guarantee for the next decade is that the escalation of talent needs will continue to become increasingly more complex. *Free agent* newer talent will abound, while returning workers who have retired at least once and more likely twice will be the increasing players in the search for public sector stability that will frame the decision points as well as actual execution of actions for all of our government organizations. Careful research regarding organizational stability will be the norm by all candidates. Candidates will clearly dictate what they are willing to accept and not accept in terms of organizational turmoil. Organizations that are ethics-less will finish last in every competition – for talent, for services, for recognition and for sustainability. Human resources will continue to be the eyes, ears, heart and soul of the most rapidly developing and great masterpiece efforts seen in innovative government. Specifically, the function will be the voice of reason when none exists.

Members of the human resources team will be required to be in full alignment with each other on all matters and the technical expertise for each member of the team will be under an ever heightening scrutiny with each public action taken. Organizational responsiveness is no longer measured by time on task, but rather by quality of decision points embedded in the delivery of executed outreach to both internal and external customers. Each customer sits as a highly interactive player in government service systems demanding to be included and to influence the overall outcomes that occur in areas of their personal interest. The human resource function is often the first and last ambassador of touch and service that the citizen customer interacts with on any given topic. We perform the role of buffer for the majority of untouchable issues that surface and can affect the long term employability of our peers.

### **Ethics Tenet #1 - Scrutiny by the Public of All Organizations Has Only Reached Its Initial Plateau**

Many long standing guidelines for acceptable employee behavior are no longer deemed acceptable. In the face of the spiraling numbers of both private and public sector scandals that mark the worldwide daily media, employee and organizational behavioral standards are being continuously

redefined. This momentum will continue to gain inertia over the next decade as Generation X, Y and I workers join the ranks of the U.S. and international workforce and compete for their interests to be heard along with those of the Boomer and Silent Generations. How will the incorporated five generations in the worldwide labor force work, often in contradiction to each other's values and still expect their organizations to thrive? There is much active debate about the potential synergy of the value systems of all of the generations currently represented in today's workforce. Many seasoned authors focus on the contradictory aspects of these personal systems, while newer authors seek to find parallel alignment that focuses on placing the well being of an organization ahead of individual and vitriolic needs. Human resource practitioners will craft the result of this inquiry as the truth lying somewhere in between on this value laden continuum.

The fact is that the similarities or differences among the various generations should not be the issue of primary concern. The matter of focus must be the increasingly high demands of the greater public, as well as the individual consumer's demand for full transparency and access to all business matters supported by public as well as private funds. The concept of accountability has been redefined. Human behavior may or may not support this redefinition process across all industries. The role of the human resources function is now and will continue to be that of a facilitator for change. Strategists will be identified as those inside an organization who are able to identify the needs for systemic change, chart the course for the change process, deflect the naysayers from all levels of the organizational hierarchy and bring positive results as rapidly as possible to those who have withstood the force of the change process against all odds. The human resources function must be fully prepared to assume this type of role or be marginalized as no longer relevant to the needs of their own organization.

## **Ethics Tenet #2 - Inconsistency and Special Treatment of the Favored Few Has Lost Its Allure**

Upon what platform will the application of favored treatment ever again be an appropriate explanation? As lines are drawn to potentially identify and favor a few, what is the impact on the majority of a public sector organization's workforce? A key fumble of new and seasoned public sector human resource leaders is to link to a few favored supporters and build a local kingdom within the workplace around those select individuals. Once viewed as the safest approach to guaranteed recognition as a leader, key leadership authors today disavow this short sighted approach to this limited sense of security and empire building. Beginning with longitudinal studies conducted by the Gallup organization, to the ongoing marketplace studies conducted by the Ethics Resource Center to Patrick Lencioni's work on the dysfunctions of a team, the key voices in the marketplace stipulate the need for all leaders to stretch beyond what is within arm's reach and risk the current and future state of their organization by hiring for individual strengths and building capacity along the way.

To do otherwise sends a message that all generations of workers will reject. Namely that favored candidates advance based upon relationships only, rather than capabilities. Members of today's workforce have found their voices and do not hesitate to disclaim preferential advantage for anyone. As human resource professionals and ethics based leaders we are called upon to sort out the inconsistencies that surface daily inside each of our public sector organizations. These inconsistencies take the form of hiring only within the supervisors image, regardless of their capability to lead as demonstrated by past accomplishments; commitment to outdated policies and procedures that are 'safe' and not forward moving in terms of the needs of the organization; and denying that problems

exist in violation of human resource regulatory items across all major areas of hiring, promotion, training and development and discipline.

The role of the human resource function has become one of ever more necessitated clear thinking, thus identifying what seems untouchable in terms of erroneous decision making thus serving as the mirror into which peers and superiors can easily gaze to test the business practices that are underway on any given day. The role of *truth teller* is a most difficult one for the human resources function to master. Without careful orchestration, this can be translated into 'being an obstacle' and not exhibiting flexibility when an internal organizational unit needs assistance. In fact, the role of human resources is often to save the internal client from their own shortsightedness. Sending that message is not only a delicate assignment it often changes relationships permanently and not always for the better.

### **Ethics Tenet #3 - Loyalty Is No Longer For Sale**

How loud will the voices of discontent be among reasoned workers who do not trust their employer? In what form will the communication finally be uttered? The increased tempo accompanying the escalated application of whistle blowing, the uncovering of scandals such as Enron, Tyco and within various government entities around the world have provided the foundation for altered and enhanced volumes of dissent on all matters of concern in the public square. The attempt by questionable employers to 'purchase' employee loyalty is like a frenzied end of the month sale at a local big box store. The retailer hopes for brand allegiance, only to find that the next big sale at a local competitor finds their favorite 'client/customer/staff member' racing to the competitor's door.

Self preservation and ego based needs drive the outcome of these daily choices for members of the global workforce. Frequency of opportunity propels the timing of the spending of loyalty dollars and commitment to individual and organizational choices. Ethics based organizations will fair best and strongest in the race for candidate and employee allegiance simply because they are deemed worthy of being trusted. An organization that is trustworthy communicates its values to professionals and candidates weighing the taking of employment risks in terms of their deliberate career alignment for any given period of time.

### **Ethics Tenet #4 - The Train Will Be De-Railed – It's Just a Matter of Time**

Is it realistic to expect that public sector employees should live with a sense of ethics based foreboding and disquiet for the sake of protecting inept decision makers? Does this expectation of silent behavior serve as the foundation for a 'best practices' organization? Employees in today's marketplace understand the ratio of supply and demand. Specifically, the newer worker of today aligns where they believe their time, resources and talents are best spent. There is little to no tolerance for inept leadership, disorganized direction, mission-less commitment or ego centered positioning on issues deemed of no relevance. For the newest workers, their time is their most valued asset. To spend it outside of an alignment with their values is so incongruent that self orchestrated attrition is preferred. As organizations worldwide are struggling to remain constant in the area of talent acquisition and development, at what point is an assessment of the impact of executive leadership mandatory in order

to compile critical information to answer and determine the most significant choices that must be made to move an organization forward to optimal health.

### **Ethics Tenet #5 - Exemplary Organizations Don't Settle**

How long does it take to become a leaderless organization? What form does a leaderless organization assume in both the short and long term? How many leaders survive using this type of executive management skill set? Many organizations have literally been leaderless their whole existence. Informal or at times elected leaders assume the helm in name or through positional authority. In terms of daily authority to affect change, however, no leader exists. Internal subordinate staff moves the organization forward, often through rote memory and independent and questionable judgment. However, without their expertise the entire operation would collapse. Professional, highly skilled talents who are exercising ethics based leadership are not drawn to an environment where the concept of leadership is little more than ill defined. Ineffective leaders seeking a shelter of dysfunctionality most often form the identified management of leaderless organizations. Early career development for newer professionals reflects the use of this type of organization as a training ground for what 'not' to do or practice once professionals have assumed any level of legitimate authority within their defined career track.

Who will assume the burden of exposing the aspects of leaderless impact on an organization? Most often it will be some aspect of the human resources function. We manage people, places and services. Hence the eclectic coordination of these three in the face of incongruence of leadership causes those who are most disenchanting to often point to the human resources function with greater than normal expectations that 'something will be done' to correct in extreme discomfort that can escalate so rapidly when leaders are selected by time in place, personal relationships or because he/she is seen to be a 'safe' choice for the ultimate agendas of elected bodies or officials. This expectation is often played out in public meetings when a cry for 'why wasn't something done about this' is heard. The role of human resources is to raise effective and professional questions all along the way, not simply when a situation is to the point of explosiveness.

### **Ethics Tenet #6 - Recruitment, Retention and Resilience – Mandatory Integration**

Is it possible to effectively recruit talent using one organizational persona and expect retention of developed talent applying yet another profile? Can an organization remain vital and resilient with any level of disparity between their marketing image and daily life? What level of anxiety will be manifest for both employees and customers and what outcome will this disequilibrium eventually produce? The front end of the human capital effort to attract and fill positions is no longer the primary concern for the majority of industries in terms of global workforce efforts. The primary issue has now shifted to retention and resilience of team members, regardless of assignment. Ethics based organizations have learned to fully integrate human resources staff not only in the recruiting, on-boarding and professional

development divisions of their organization; they have included a cross section of ongoing employee input in the strategy process for these efforts.

The inclusion of newer workers in the design and distillation of on-boarding activities is critical to keeping the efforts relevant to those new individuals just arriving to carry the banner forward over the next generation of service. As crucial is the inclusion of senior service staff that control the intellectual knowledge that must be off-loaded prior to their last promotion or to an early, staged or progressive retirement process. If coordination does not exist at the apex of an organization for these efforts to take place, the more discerning employees will spend little to no time vesting inside the organization for the sake of its longevity. They will vest primarily for the sake of knowledge transfer for themselves, in order to move their skill set significantly ahead of their peer group members. The role of the human resources function in this effort is to work diligently to partner all stakeholders for maximum input at all times. Collaborative teaming of customers, peers and supervisors is mandatory to reach the highest levels of leadership integration.

#### **Ethics Tenet #7 - There is No Perfect Plan – Commitment to Real Work is Required**

Are there cohesive commitments within and among all levels of the organization that will embrace ethics based leadership as lifelong work? Is this work boldly validated as the most important aspect of what is accomplished as a part of the organization's legacy? The work of ethics based leadership is renewable hourly. It is unique in that there is no template for this effort. There are many recommended ways by which ethics based leadership can be designed inside training programs and delivered both on ground and on line to an organizations general workforce. However, that is not the real work of the ethics based leader. The real work begins and ends with discussing the undiscussible. And being comfortable doing so. The mentor and coach aspects to the role of an ethics based leader are rich with contextual fodder. It is a high risk endeavor that must be met head on and embraced. The human resources function is the key support system for these activities.

#### **Ethics Tenet #8 - A Plan for Ethical Standards Must Be Teachable**

Is there recognition that one of the greatest challenges within the workforce of today and tomorrow is the need to devote time to develop all levels of employee talent? How does the basis for ethical expectations fit into this development process? Are there levels of employees who have been deliberately left out? Why? Workforce stratification has long been a disguised method of discerning and labeling stars and method actors as well as marginal performers. If not deemed stars, myriads of employees find themselves often dismissed or not listened to with commitment despite their vision of the daily ethics underway inside the organization in which they have dedicated a large share of their lives. What better way to teach sustainable ethics than to invite discourse in every manner possible. This includes staff meetings, program reviews, performance management evaluation processes and published policy documentation that is reviewed and updated annually. The most discerning candidates will seek out information in relationship to all of the working conditions inside a prospective environment. It is best to have a full alignment within these dimensions of the environment prior to direct questions being asked about why certain things are lacking. The greatest legacy for any organization is to deliver a level of service in a manner that is open and welcomes full scrutiny and debate. To treat employees in a manner less than parallel to this will not work in the long term.

## **Ethics Tenet #9 – Ethics Based Leadership Is Simply Good Business**

Is an organization capable of sustaining the platinum standard of reaching for the most advanced ethics based framework possible? What does it take to have both an emotional as well as an intellectual commitment to continue to raise standards and to welcome inquiry? Who will be taking on this assignment across the organization for the discernable future? It is an extraordinary time in the world at large for individual and collective leadership to be manifest in ever more clear and exacting ways. Those who have lead tenuously, but with an idea as to what real leadership could look like, now have the chance to lead with decisiveness. Those who have lead through domination and power will no longer be blindly followed to the point of denigration of countless aspects of individual humanity. Our world economy and supporting social fabric has not been more closely examined than at this point in history.

With this intensified examination comes a responsibility that can no longer be avoided. This responsibility is manifest in layer upon layer of expectations for answers that are coherent about choices that are being made daily within all public sector organizations. The standards for these choices can be nurtured, redefined, improved upon and enhanced to ever rising levels through the use of ethics based leadership. While requiring significant amounts of real energy and personal investment, the best organizations will continuously seek ever higher standards and be proud to be a part of this process, even though personal sacrifice may be a part of the ongoing effort toward rebalancing within the ethics based decision making process.

Exemplary organizations will seek to re-align with the challenge of continuous ethics based leadership, rather than wait for the enforcement of these standards to become mandatory. Exemplary ethics based leaders welcome the scrutiny that this re-alignment tool affords and endorse the chance to perfect their organizational standards through ever evolving ethics initiatives. The passion for constancy in keeping the ethics debate at the forefront of all issues is what will drive highly performing employees and their individual commitment to accept only excellence in all that is done within an organization. To settle for less than what is passion bound, is to settle for a simple and degrading mediocrity, that can only reflect in the worst possible way on all that comprises the potential of the human spirit and the role that organizations can play in developing each individual employee's talent.

### **The Opportunity for Excellence through Ethics Based Leadership**

The human resources function in every public sector organization is the key to the organization's overall excellence. To embrace and be fully involved in leadership requires that the human resources professionals inside a public sector organization fully embrace the understanding that their role is fluid. At times they will be gatekeepers of the knowledge that effectively shifts the course of history for the organization. In other circumstances they will be asked to assume a secondary role providing input as to how the organization will be perceived by stakeholders and internal as well as external clients under the most controversial of circumstances. Yet a third instance of action may include being the messenger for information that no one else in the organization has the courage to carry forward. This level of risk taking is the ultimate in terms of balance, timing and credibility for those who are involved in the human resources function. It is often the measure of a human resources assignment most often shunned by the newer professional for fear of loss of a position or a shift in credibility.

Regardless of the nature of the assignment and expectations levied for the human resources function, it must be within the full capability of a highly skilled professional to perform well inside any of these types of sub-roles. What stands the test of capability as well as sustained credibility is the use of ethical based leadership as the frame work for all choices being made. The definition of ethics varies by individual respondent but often includes such responses as 'doing the right thing', 'having all of your actions be measured by full transparency at all levels', or 'feeling confident that each aspect of the behavior that you engage in is a best practice in the technical industry in which you are engaged'. The more cynical measure is often centered around media coverage, or 'how will it play out if captured on the front page of the local newspaper'. Regardless of the *method* of measurement, the human resources function and all of its professionals have an inherent responsibility to lead their organization in the highest level of ethics based service possible. A method that often is most effective overall is to gain the reputation as an individual and professional that we will simply not be involved in anything less than ethics based work. Therefore, our organizational impact moves ahead of us in even the most difficult of circumstances. This level of work is *legacy work*. It stands long after we move on to another position, we are sourced for a career promotion or we retire.

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