The issue of ethics in public service is as old as government itself. Yet “post-Watergate morality” has produced an enduring and unprecedented level of concern about the integrity of democratic governance (Garment, 1991). In the 1990s alone, the continuous stream of revelations, allegations, and investigations— involving presidents, presidential advisors, a U.S. Senator, a Speaker of the House of Representatives, a Ways and Means Committee chairman, cabinet secretaries, a Supreme Court nominee, Gulf War syndrome spokesmen, campaign contributors, and numerous state and local officials— suggests that this concern is unlikely to change any time soon. Nonetheless, this may be a Dickensian “tale of two cities”: when there is despair, there also may be hope.

Indeed, ethical considerations can hardly be overlooked in a time of popular reforms that attempt to transform the public service ethos in the name of productivity (Gore, 1993). They are of fundamental importance to the quality of democracy and its administration. “Questions of morality and right conduct,” Jeremy Plant (1997) points out, “are now considered as significant as the traditional concerns of Wilsonian Public Administration” like efficiency.

Driven by the increase in public attention (Adams, et al., 1993) and the recognition of the underlying importance of ethical conduct in government (Thompson, 1992), there have been several national ethics conferences (Park City, 1991; Tampa, 1995; St. Louis, 1996), a recently revised workbook (Mertins et al., 1994; also see Lewis, 1991), a case book (Pasquerella, et al., 1996), and a new journal (Public Integrity Annual, 1996). In addition, much of the writing in the field has been codified (Madsen and Shafritz, 1992 and Richter, et al., 1990; also see Bowman, 1991; Frederickson, 1993; Cooper, 1994; Cooper and Wright, 1994; Reynolds, 1995).
In the context of these events, the American Society of Public Administration (ASPA) promulgated its newly-revamped code of ethics in 1995. The association's Professional Ethics Committee subsequently requested that a membership survey, based on the senior author's 1989 survey of the same organization (Bowman, 1990), be conducted to obtain an initial assessment of the effectiveness of the code. This was especially propitious timing because the intervening years witnessed the passing of the Decade of Greed and the coming of the Decade of Reinventing Government, a period of turbulent change that has included innovations, downsizing, and, as noted, scandals at all levels of government.

A questionnaire (consisting of agree-disagree statements as well as several multiple choice and open-ended items), with a copy of the ASPA Code of Ethics, was mailed in spring 1996 to a random sample of 750 administrators who are members of the society. Usable replies were received from 59 percent of those contacted, a respectable response rate for this methodology and one comparable to earlier research. A profile of the respondents, which matches the ASPA practitioner membership, reveals a group that is predominantly white, male, well educated, experienced in local government, a middle or senior level manager, relatively high income, moderate to liberal in political philosophy, and holds at least a six-year membership in ASPA.

The results explore three topics in ascending order of emphasis: perceptions regarding ethics in society and government, the nature of integrity in public agencies, and ASPA's Code. The implications of the data, and the part that a professional organization can play to enhance honorable behavior, are then examined.

Ethics in Society

Several questions probed respondents' perceptions of ethical concerns in the nation. The findings indicate that these administrators do not believe that contemporary interest in morality is ephemeral. Most (83 percent) reject the claim that "The current concern of American society with ethics in government is a passing fad" (10 percent agree; the balance are undecided). Indeed, two-thirds (67 percent) think that this interest "seems to be steadily growing over time" (19 percent disagree; the remainder are uncertain—proportions that are similar to those found in 1989).

Is this increased attention merely rhetorical in nature? Today a clear majority (62 percent) disagree that "Ethics is similar to the weather: everyone talks about it, but no one does anything about it" (28 percent concur; the rest are undecided), in contrast with 48 percent who dissented earlier. This suggests a readiness to address moral issues as it appears that ethics is "here to stay" and that cynicism may be on the wane.

This willingness may stem from an impatience with—and relative unimportance of—sensationalized scandals; nearly three-fourths of the administrators in both studies (1996: 74 percent; 1989: 73 percent) believe that "incidents of outright criminality in government distract attention from more subtle, genuine ethical dilemmas." Survey participants now, in brief, see an augmented interest in public virtue, but (unlike those in the late 1980s) hint that something will come of it. Indeed, contemporary salience may be a result of disappointment in self-governance and the corresponding need to renew the foundations of trust in democracy.

...these administrators do not believe that contemporary interest in morality is ephemeral.

As part of such an effort, there is, not surprisingly, considerable unease about following the example set by corporate America so soon after the excesses of the 1980s. Comparable percentages of administrators in both periods (now: 85 percent; then: 86 percent) reject the claim that "government morality in America is lower than business morality." However self-serving such views may be, private enterprise is not seen as a standard in conducting the public's business—a sobering thought in an era of privatization, contracting out, downsizing, entrepreneurialism, and the 1994 financial debacle in Orange County, California. In light of these data, what can be said about moral behavior in the conduct of daily management?

Integrity in Agencies

There does not appear to be any false sense that government organizations are exempt from ethical concerns. Respondents were asked to react to this statement: "All people, especially managers, encounter ethical dilemmas at work." As in 1989, virtually every administrator (97 percent, 96 percent earlier) agrees that this is true, a finding consistent with that of the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (1993) regarding employee observance of fraud, waste, and abuse. Ethical matters clearly "come with the territory" in the workplace life of public agencies.

Interestingly, over three-fourths of the administrators (76 percent versus 67 percent previously) believe that ethical concern can be empowering in organizations (7 percent say no; the balance are uncertain). Indeed, 60 percent of the managers (65 percent in 1989) reject the claim that "expressions of ethical concern...evoke cynicism, self-righteousness, paranoia, and/or laughter." Likewise, approximately 60 percent in both studies (1996: 60 percent; 1989: 57 percent) dispute the assertion that ethics is "meaningless because organizational cultures encourage a Machiavellian philosophy of power, survival, and expediency (24 percent concur; 16 percent are undecided). In short, despite evidence of "squallid times," when "objective conditions are appalling...and discourse to deal with troubles is impossible" (Plant, 1996, 1), many of these managers are nonetheless comfortable with raising these issues at work.

Still, a large proportion (46 percent, 50 percent previously) concedes that supervisors are under pressure to compromise personal standards. The source of this stress appears to be the top levels of the organization. Many (55 percent today, 60 percent in the earlier poll) doubt that the "ethical standards of elected and appointed officials are as high as those held by career civil servants" (just 26 percent agree; the rest are uncertain). Further, nearly 90 percent dispute the contention that "senior management has a stronger set of ethical standards than I do" (as opposed to 75 percent in 1989). Apparently, the respondents agree with Paul Appleby, who warned of the harm that can be done by top officials who are "amateurs in governmental responsibility" (1952, x).

To summarize, these practitioners encounter dilemmas, believe that ethics can be empowering in organizational cultures, are able
to surmount social taboos about discussing ethics, and perceive tension between top officials and careerists. What role do organizations serve in building an environment conducive to integrity? To probe this issue, organizational policies and leadership activities in agencies are examined next.

## Moral Standards in Organizational Conduct

### Organizational Approach

Since many decisions in government must supplant personal preferences, there is little doubt that individual actions can be affected by an institution's written policies and unwritten expectations. It is not unexpected, then, that nearly two-thirds (65 percent) of the executives agree that "organizations define and control the situations in which decisions are made" (25 percent disagree; 11 percent are undecided). Agencies certainly are major vectors of social control.

Survey participants were asked to characterize their impressions about organizational approaches toward ethics (Table 1). Nearly one-fourth of the sample in both periods believe that institutions have a reactive, negative, primitive, "low road" approach to ethics, one that reinforces popular suspicions and focuses on wrongdoing. A "high road," affirmative strategy that encourages ethical behavior and deters, rather than merely detects, problems describes 11 percent of organizations (versus below 7 percent in 1989) according to the 1996 respondents.

Correspondingly, just under 58 percent of the managers (vs. 64 percent earlier) believe that most agencies employ no consistent approach. If a key function of management is to create moral consciousness in organizations, imbue them with high purpose, and act as a steward of the system, then some progress may be being made—although there remains considerable room for improvement.

Thus in response to several 1996-only survey questions, a majority of managers (54 percent) indicate that their organization has never provided formal ethics training (22 percent state that training is offered at least once after hiring; 6 percent say upon hiring only); just 17 percent claim that it is given on a continuing basis. Nearly six of every ten (58 percent) report that their organization does not have "an internal ethics oversight office or a person directly responsible for dealing with ethical concerns" (40 percent say that it does with the balance uncertain). Finally, a majority (52 percent) state that their organization does not come "under the jurisdiction of an external governmental ethics commission or agency" (47 percent say that it does; the remainder are uncertain). Less than one-half of the respondents, then, report that they are provided with pertinent resources in the form of training, an internal ethics office, or an external commission. It follows that just 38 percent concur that "there is an on-going effort to reinforce an ethics code in my agency" (43 percent disagree; the balance are undecided).

### Organizational Leadership

It appears that there is no agreed-upon, usable standard or procedure to assist employees in most agencies. Consequently, many offices either ignore, shift responsibility, or simply have no strategy whatsoever for dealing with ethics. An incoherent, frequently passive, and/or reactive philosophy is not likely to support, nurture, or benefit those seeking to carefully resolve ethical dilemmas.

Accordingly, the 1996 survey participants were asked what techniques work best (and least) in fostering ethics and deterring ethical lapses in their own organizations (nearly 70 percent replied). The answers to these free-response questions were diverse, overlapping, and not readily quantifiable. It is difficult to overstate, however, the importance of management by example—i.e., the demonstration of desired conduct by department heads and elected officials. "Living the example sets expectations for all members of the organization," believes a city fire chief from a mid-Atlantic state.

The daily activities of leaders, including real instances of proper behavior, show the importance of ethics to employees and to the agency. "Ethics can only be fostered through top-level managers modeling ethical behavior and requiring the same from all others in the organization," writes the budget director of a large Wisconsin city. In short, leaders must possess integrity and practice ethics if the entire unit is to operate with a high level of morality. "Top management," says a deputy city manager from a Southwestern urban area, "must set the standard for ethical behavior for the agency." Nurturing worthy conduct is best done through advocacy, publicity, and celebration, a Kansas county administrator notes without further elaboration.

By interpolation, advocacy likely means leadership with commitment and behavior, attitude, and action. Many respondents say that what works best is to encourage discussions that test professional integrity and to identify actual problems and develop

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency of Ethical Approaches in Organizations, 1996 and 1989</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1996 Percentage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24.7 (n = 110)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.5 (n = 47)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57.8 (n = 258)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 (n = 14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100.0 (n = 446)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Did not sum to 100 percent due to rounding.
practical solutions to them. This promotes an atmosphere of trust and openness where alternative viewpoints can be examined without fear or favor. A senior higher education official from New York state believes that effective learning takes place when there are "examples of when things go wrong, and people see the episode unfold and bring to a conclusion." "Being open, honest, and truthful," holds a high official in the state comptroller's office in the northeast, "fosters ethical behavior in return." A library director from a California county adds that "clearly stated policies and written procedures also help establish baseline understandings."

Responses related to publicity, the second method to encourage rectitude, generally prescribe an advocacy role and not just a reaction when incidents occur. Routinized ethics practice and regular training to ensure awareness, support, and understanding are key. For instance, a finance director in an upper Midwest city suggests that a series of ethics-oriented policy meetings with an annual review of each policy be held throughout the year. A division deputy director in the United States Department of Education finds an internal ethics office helpful in resolving issues. Another manager, from a California city, utilizes an ethics commission hotline to discuss problems. Such activities confirm leadership support for ethical precepts, provide agency-specific examples, and offer continuing education on relevant issues.

Advocacy and publicity, finally, lead to celebration; when examples are set and issues examined, recognition should follow to cultivate honorable behavior. A New York City planner maintains that "an awards ceremony or other special recognition to those who demonstrate excellence in government, as measured by ASPA's Code of Ethics," is a productive way to nurture virtue.

These three activities ensure ongoing organizational development by demonstrating the significance of appropriate conduct in agency life. A public works director in a Midwestern city reports that his "department head believes in ethics, communicates that belief to subordinates, and always considers ethics in all actions." Another respondent from Wyoming states that her "director has the ASPA Code of Ethics on the wall and practices from the code." In short, leadership exemplars nourish a constant recognition of professionalism and employee pride in unit accomplishments.

Approaches that work least in promoting meritorious behavior include not taking the above actions; as one respondent indicates, both the best and the worst technique is the example set by leadership. Negative executive styles compiled from the responses include the sometimes overlapping approaches of neglect, hypocrisy, and exhortation.

Ignoring ethical concerns, first, ranges from benign neglect through indifference and accommodation to silence, according to the sample. Administrators complain that such issues simply are left unaddressed; there is no discussion of them since they are never mentioned. As a state government middle manager from the Northeast observes, "when sunlight is blackened, darkness prevails." A senior planner in a large central Florida city and the community development director in a Tennessee town concur that closed organizations promote secrecy and distrust which, in turn, encourages dubious actions. Ignoring the problem, contends an assistant city manager from the Southeast, simply "doesn't work."

In this environment, the respondents indicate, when relevant issues do arise, they are not taken seriously, are given lip service, and are covered up. Hypocrisy then prevails with:

- A "do as I say, not as I do" approach (a systems analyst from the Northeast).
- Fatuous pronouncements (a USDA program analyst in Washington, DC).
- Finger-pointing, pigeonholing, and false accusations (a state grants analyst in Minnesota).
- Mandatory training sessions for low-level employees (a USAID program analyst) or for everyone—except the poor role models (a USDA policy official).
- The publishing of a code—and forgetting it (a Midwest legislative budget director).

Problems are whitewashed, employees are held to a different standard than managers, and a controlling, micromanagement style exists. A program officer from a California locality writes that few employees have had the chance to assume ownership of the standards that are enforced and unilateral problem resolution by management is the norm. The third, related negative leadership style, exhortation, consists of preaching, directing, and telling people how to behave. A rigid and reactive rule-book approach with no supporting training prevails.

Neglect, hypocrisy, and exhortation all reflect a passive, reactive, or defensive strategy that accomplishes little. Staff are treated like children, few resources are provided, and there are inconsistent and ambiguous policies, according to a senior administrative officer in California state government.

Neglect, hypocrisy, and exhortation all reflect a passive, reactive, or defensive strategy that accomplishes little. Staff are treated like children, few resources are provided, and there are inconsistent and ambiguous policies, according to a senior administrative officer in California state government. There is frequently no mechanism to report or deal with ethical problems. Instead, respondents indicate that rule-driven procedures focus on control, not guidelines for encouraging proper conduct. A legalistic approach, according to a department assistant director in a Georgia city, where some things are allowed and others not, prevails.

The worst technique is to leave the responsibility for organizational ethics to elected officials; often their attitude is "it did not break any laws." I had to resign a position because of pressure from elected officials that would have forced me to violate the code of ethics. (A city government housing commissioner from Michigan)

In summary, the influence of management by example, positively (when upheld by advocacy, publicity, and celebration) or negatively (when followed by neglect, hypocrisy, and exhortation), is substantial. Yet it is unrealistic to assume that role models can serve as the sole means to effect ethical behavior. While it is apparent that some progress has been made in organizational policies
Many studies reveal that business and government executives regard codes of conduct as the most valuable way to promote ethics, and leadership initiatives, it is also true that work remains to be done.

Codes of Ethics and the ASPA Case

Many studies reveal that business and government executives regard codes of conduct as the most valuable way to promote ethics (however, see Gortner, 1991), possibly because they are seen as an important indicator of professionalism (Robin, 1989). In results comparable to 1989, just 3 percent of the respondents are satisfied that “There is no real need for codes of ethics in work organizations” (more than 90 percent disagree or strongly disagree). There is little dispute, then, that codes meet a genuine need.

Not only are they seen as important, but also there is less uncertainty today about their actual effect than was the case before. Some 44 percent discern a difference between agencies that have codes and those that do not. This compares to 38 percent in the earlier survey (approximately 20 percent in both studies do not believe that a difference exists, although the undecided proportion has declined). Once again there is a measurable, if modest, progression in perceptions of affirmative ethical practices.

Still, these data suggest that codes may not necessarily be conducive to exemplary behavior—a finding at variance with much of the literature (e.g., Bruce, 1996). How can professional associations, especially those with a broad, interdisciplinary scope, promote effective ethical standards? In 1984, ASPA adopted a 12-point code of ethics which was subsequently revamped into five overarching principles in late 1994 (Van Wart, 1996). The survey participants were asked “Are you familiar with the ASPA Code of Ethics?”

Today, nearly 8 of 10 (79 percent) members claim familiarity contrasted to 58 percent in 1989. Moreover, among those answering affirmatively, their degree of acquaintance with the code surpasses that found earlier. Thus, only 21 percent admit, “I have heard of it” (cf., 34 percent previously), while 65 percent say they “have a general familiarity” (versus 56 percent before) and 14 percent report they “are quite familiar” with the code (cf., 10 percent earlier).

These results indicate that the depth and breadth awareness of the ASPA statement has increased substantially in a short period of time. Perhaps this is partly due to the 1994 revision and its frequent reprinting in Public Administration Review. Coupled with survey results shown elsewhere, it is likely that the code has the potential to impact daily management. No longer is a very large segment of the membership “either unaware or has but a passing acquaintance with” the code as reported in the previous study (Bowman, 1990, 349). Such a standard, arguably, should meet at least two criteria to be productive: acceptability and enforceability. That is, not only must those governed by the code believe in (or at least acquiesce to) its principles, but the policy must also have an enforcement mechanism.

Acceptability

Most administrators (90 percent in 1996, 70 percent in 1989) affirm that the “Code provides an appropriate set of standards” to guide public administrators. There is nonetheless recognition that more tailored policies are needed for different workplaces. Thus, some two-thirds in both surveys suggest that for the ASPA document to be truly effective, it “must be supplemented by an agency-specific code,” a finding that suggests a possible role for the society.

The test of acceptability is, of course, whether or not the ideals embodied in the code are actually practiced. In another considerable shift, a total of 85 percent (69 percent in 1989) report that they either “often” (65 percent versus 38 percent earlier) or “occasionally” (20 percent versus 34 percent previously) use the code and/or its principles on the job.

A 1996 open-ended question provides some depth to this finding. Managers were asked to describe an ethical dilemma in their agency, and whether or not the code helped them. Those responding (40 percent of the total) were divided over its utility, as approximately one-half found it helpful and one-half did not. Among the former, most of the written comments focused on the code’s value in providing a benchmark for interpreting the public interest, dealing with conflicts of interest, and coping with improper influences on decision-making by elected officials. Among the latter, administrators stated that other standards were used, the ASPA document contained incompatible provisions, the credo did not deal with specific issues, or that it was not applicable because the respondent was caught in the middle with no authority to resolve the issue.

In short, most of the entire sample either often or occasionally used the code in their work; this can go beyond inspirational and educational purposes to use in decision-making. At that point, however, its efficacy is called into question (for the reasons indicated) by one-half of those managers who answered the essay item.

More interesting results are found in the responses to the question, “With what frequency is the ASPA Code and/or its principles used by your agency in daily management?” In 1996, nearly two-thirds (65 percent) state that it is used “fairly often,” with another one-fifth (20 percent) saying “occasionally,” 7 percent “seldom,” and 5 percent “never.” In stark contrast, almost two-thirds (65 percent) indicated that it was “seldom” used in 1989 (one-fourth “occasionally,” and approximately one-tenth “often”; the “never” option did not appear previously).

These data appear inconsistent with the views of the majority (54 percent), who agree that “The role of ‘umbrella’ professional associations such as ASPA in affecting the ethical behavior of its members—to say nothing of government as a whole—is very limited” (31 percent disagree; the rest are undecided). Perhaps these managers are being “realistic”; while the code can be helpful in thinking about problems, actual behavior may be governed by agency rules. Or possibly the apparent inconsistency is an adaptation of “thinking globally, acting locally”. While only so much can be done by a voluntary association, initiatives can be taken at specific locations. It could also be a variant of the well-known finding in ethics research (e.g., Baumhart, 1961) that people generally...
assumed that they are more ethical than others—that is, ASPA probably cannot help someone else (them), but it can reinforce the high standards in one's own agency (us). Alternatively, it may be that the question was narrowly construed as dealing with enforcement, a topic to which we now turn.

**Enforceability**

Over 90 percent agree that in order for the code to be given weight, it must first be taken seriously by top management—apparently something that is now taking place in a number of agencies. Interestingly, in proportions similar to the earlier study, a plurality (38 percent) endorse giving ASPA power to enforce the code (31 percent are undecided; 24 percent disapprove). Hesitancy on the part of members to do this may stem from questions about whether a general professional society has legitimacy to effect sanctions and whether such sanctions could be feasibly implemented.

To summarize, these practitioners—unlike their 1989 colleagues—have a substantial acquaintance with the ASPA ethics document. Not only that, but they, and many of their agencies, also use the code in daily management. If one standard of an effective credo is acceptability, then the society's code is well on its way to achieving that criterion. Over two-thirds of the sample (69 percent), in fact, favor having the following statement (with a signature line) placed on the association's membership application and annual renewal forms: "I fully support and will abide by ASPA's Code of Ethics ____________" (12 percent oppose; the balance are unsure; this item was not employed in 1989). Concerning enforceability, the second code criterion, many recognize the features that such a statement should contain, such as congruence with employee values, confidential reporting mechanisms, and sanctions for noncompliance. Further, 55 percent of the managers agree that "any code worth having is worth enforcing." Like the earlier study, however, the membership is split in granting the society compliance power. Indeed, when those who are undecided are added to those who disapprove enforcement power, a majority of the members (55 percent) does not wish ASPA to enforce the code.

One way to interpret these findings is to make a distinction between codes of conduct and codes of ethics (Bruce, 1996). Rule-based conduct codes are most often found in statutes or executive orders. Directive and top-down in approach, they are typically imposed on (and often resisted by) employees with no advice for effective implementation, training and development, or recognition of the importance of leadership modeling. Attempting to convert the realm of ethics into the realm of law, this coercive, quick-fix strategy usually reduces ethics to legality by focusing on both the lowest common denominator and penalties for deviations. The strategy does little to promote a philosophy of excellence or to engender a sense of personal responsibility. Worse, it does not work: The incidence of problems apparently is not significantly reduced (Bruce, 1996, 29; Paine, 1994). In contrast, codes of ethics demand more than simple compliance; they mandate the exercise of judgment and acceptance of responsibility for decisions rendered—the real work of ethics. Acknowledging the ambiguities and complexities of public service, ethics codes offer interpretative frameworks to clarify decision-making dilemmas.

The reluctance to grant genuine sanction authority may now be understood. [Even though respondents are well aware of the drawbacks to conduct codes, they have given widespread support for the ASPA ethics code. It is evident that respondents wish to capitalize on powerful human impulses for moral thought and action.] Enforcement and sanctions emphasize avoidance of improper behavior—something already more than adequately covered in law—and, as such, fit well with the anti-government climate. What is needed, the managers seem to say, is not more punitive minimalist ethics and the despair they tend to create.

The ASPA statement (as a code of ethics, not a code of conduct) is one of the few attempts to reinforce the legitimacy of public administration, articulate government service as a public trust, and attend to the need to take administrative discretion seriously. Ethics, Richard Green (1994, 2142) writes, then becomes an "integrative foundation for everything (managers) do and are," rather than a burdensome constraint. In short, the code provides positive moral authority. It clearly indicates the importance of the principles that it embodies. As such, the point is precisely not to levy discipline. An overwhelming majority of respondents, in fact, concur that the code—as now written—is appropriate and use its principles.

**A Case**

Ethical dilemmas in management are pervasive; both in appearance and reality they are part of being a public servant. To conclude this section on the utility of the ASPA code, then, consider the responses to the following hypothetical, but realistic, downsizing scenario:

Bob has heard from his manager that their organization's staff will be downsizing; it could be as little as 5 percent or as much as 30 percent. However, the supervisor told Bob that "we're all under strict orders to keep it quiet" so that the agency's best employees will not seek other jobs.

Ron (one of the finest professionals in Bob's unit), upon hearing the downsizing rumors, told Bob that he was sure that he could get another job at a new business if a reduction in force occurred. However, their openings will close soon. Ron asked Bob, "Will there be layoffs?" and "Should I get another job now?" Does the ASPA code assist you in thinking about this problem?

1. yes 231/54.4
2. no 88/20.7

Please explain your response:

Nearly three-fourths of the sample (74.9 percent) responded; 72 percent of those managers agree that the code assisted them, while
the balance say it did not. Most explained their answer by commenting on how it either helped or did not help them to consider the broad issues raised and/or justify their solution to the case itself.

**Codes as Helpful.** While the case was seen as an "interesting," "good," "tough," and "complex" dilemma by the managers, one opines that "it is important to pose these issues so that when situations arise, decision-makers can proceed against some background instead of in a vacuum" (an experienced administrator from the Northeast). In focusing on how the ASPA document assisted them in thinking about the general problem, these observations were offered:

- The code addresses the responsibility of an employee as well as the organization to behave ethically. (A division director in a large Wisconsin city).
- It helps me to think about my responsibilities to the organization. But it doesn’t help me to release the conflict between them and what seems to be unethical behavior on the organization’s part. It’s a dilemma—how to be ethical in an unethical environmental situation. (A mental health services assistant director in a town near Chicago).
- It provides a checklist of obligations that should be considered in thinking about the problem. In ethical dilemmas, there is usually no singular, correct answer. Ethical decision-making often requires weighing several, sometimes contradicting principles. (A department director in a California city).

The association’s statement, in short, provides a starting place or springboard for pondering specific issues. As a senior advisor to a high U.S. Office of Personnel Management official notes, “I don’t think that the code can (or should) focus on specific cases; however, it presents a conceptual framework for setting boundaries in ethical decisions.” Thus, “although the code doesn’t tell you how or what to answer, it gives you plenty of guidance as to how you can best handle the situation.”

The case, in other words, provides not only a test of the code’s utility, but also a test of one’s beliefs. It can assist in reflecting on the problem and, in so doing, the code’s guidance (combined with personal beliefs) can help to actually resolve it. Thus any respondents found the code to be practical in developing solutions to the case proper. “It allows you to do,” says a division director in a department of Los Angeles city government, “what is right.” But what is right? The sample had definite, but different, answers to this question.

For some, the employee should be told nothing since the code requires that confidential information be respected and protected. The director of finance and administration in a Northeastern jurisdiction writes “Bob was told to be quiet. What isn’t clear about that?” One’s personal integrity, in fact, would be defined by maintaining confidentiality, believes an Arkansas state official.

“No comment,” “I am not authorized to discuss rumors,” “I am not in a position to confirm or deny,” and “The decision is yours alone” are among the suitable responses for these administrators. “Bob is duly obligated,” says a New York city public health director, “to give an honest answer, which is, ‘I don’t know.’” A federal middle manager notes that:

> Section V of the code (accepting duty to keep up issues)

prepares managers/professionals to counsel on overall societal trends. Section I (serving public interest) encourages serving beyond self and “agency.” The correct response is to say “I don’t know what level of reduction may happen, but some is inevitable.” Ron, you must take personal responsibility for the choice. There are no guarantees, no easy personal decisions, in such matters.

In brief, for these officials (about one quarter of those who tackled the case), the appropriate approach is to follow orders and say as little as possible.

For others (some 25 percent), the answer to the dilemma was also straightforward: the employee should be told everything. A truly ethical organization—and one’s personal integrity—demands nothing else. Intentionally placing employees at risk, these respondents argue, is unacceptable. Further, “If you can’t be truthful,” writes a state comptroller division director from the Northeast, “you can’t be ethical.”

- ASPA’s code essentially reflects that managers and agency employees should deal with each other openly and fairly. This type of information should not be withheld from subordinates for any purpose, especially organizational convenience or expediency. (A state of Alabama department director).
- Yes, Duhl! (The code helps; tell him what you know.). See sections I, 3 (right to know) and IV, 1 (open communication). (A state of Alabama department director).
- No, to the contrary! (The code is not perfect). (A state of Virginia department director).

- Sections I (Serve the Public Interest), II (Demonstrate Personal Integrity), and III (Strive for Professional Excellence) all have relevance; if you can’t keep your best people unless you lie, you don’t deserve them. (A program officer, US Department of State).

These administrators, then, believe that the bottom line is unambiguous truth telling: people’s needs must be put ahead of organizational needs.

Finally, still other managers (approximately 50 percent) wanted it both ways—or sought a win-win solution by weighing conflicting elements in the code. For them, it is possible to respect privileged information while simultaneously respecting employees. Thus the principle of promoting ethical organizations through open communication (Section IV) will assist Bob in dealing with his manager (discussing rumors in the first place is inappropriate), while demonstrating personal integrity (Section III) will help Bob deal with Ron (telling Ron and not the entire staff is improper). Accordingly, for these respondents, Bob could tell Ron that he himself has heard rumors too, and that since they must be dealt with, he (Bob) will seek clarification from his supervisor—something only top management can provide.

**Code as Not Helpful.** As for the one-fourth of the sample who found the code not to be useful, they too commented on the ASPA statement proper as well as its utility to the case. Concerning the former, these administrators indicated that they would rely on their own values, personal philosophy, common sense, good manners, and feelings to do what is right regardless of what the code says. A transportation planner in a large Florida city writes, “It is good to know that others are concerned about ethics in government, but I don’t think I would stop to review the ASPA ethics
code before I acted on this situation. Personal ethics apply to both the organization and fellow workers." These are, then, subjective matters in which no code can be very effective.

Perhaps one reason for this viewpoint is that the managers found that the society's document could be interpreted one way or another because of its competing values. Since its internal contradictions make decision-making impossible, "everything" still comes down to personal ethics.

Codes, especially such broadly-worded ones like ASPA's, are not like procedures or manuals that guide someone through to a decision. Their value lies in establishing a tone or climate within an organization. The ASPA code is too "cluttered" with self-evident principles (e.g., II.3 Eliminate discrimination; II.4 Prevent mismanagement of public funds), with policy mandates (e.g., affirmative action), and simplistic formulas (e.g., I.5). Fewer, more personal standards like those in Section V (Strive for Excellence) would be more effective (A New York local administrator).

Concerning the case specifically, the responses paralleled those just given—i.e., the scenario was a personal, not a professional, dilemma and/or because of differing obligations, the code provides no solution. A management analyst from a California city believes that "the code is of no real help (as) no code could cover 100 percent of the situations 100 percent of the time." A city manager in Kansas concurs, saying that "After reading the case, I scanned the code, and nothing struck me as a clear guide." A mayor of a Northeastern town summarizes these views by stating that while "the case is a real problem...codes are just words."

To conclude this section, the responses revealed that most managers found the code to be beneficial in thinking about the larger issues represented by the case as well as in developing differing strategies to deal with it. A minority of the sample, however, believed that the code in general is not practical (personal values predominate in decisions; it contains incompatible ideas), and, therefore, is no help in solving the case. Yet what is important is not that the ASPA statement is an imperfect instrument, but rather that dilemmas arise precisely because duties conflict. Both trivial and significant, these conflicts will be resolved by repairing to some standard. In seeking to assist decisionmakers, the ethical values in the code clearly are critical for most of the respondents.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Please select the statement that best describes the approach that ASPA should adopt in addressing ethical concerns.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>57.2 (n = 255)</td>
<td>1 advocate: promote public service as an honorable profession by drafting ethics legislation, offering training to appointed officials, and/or speaking out publicly when public officials act (un)ethically.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.7 (n = 128)</td>
<td>2 consultant: develop agency-specific model codes and encourage members to have their agencies adopt and adopt them by providing technical assistance, convening symposia, and/or creating curricula.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1 (n = 27)</td>
<td>3 evaluator: appraise agency programs by rating them against the ASPA standards, tracking unethical practices, recognizing individual and agency ethical initiatives, and/or investigating those who violate the code.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.8 (n = 26)</td>
<td>4 other: __________________________________________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 (n = 10)</td>
<td>5 No Response</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusions

This study shows that ethics is a matter of substantial and increasing concern in public management. Since standards of practice are inherent in the very concept of professional life and ASPA expects its members to exemplify code principles, what can be done to support them in making principled judgments?

As in 1989, most respondents want the society to take a proactive role in this area. Although no quantitative data were gathered in the earlier research, the responses to a 1989 essay question about the association's role were categorized into three partially overlapping ideas: ASPA-as-advocate, consultant, and evaluator. These functions formed the basis for the multiple-choice item in 1996 (Table 2).

Nearly 6 of every 10 members (57.2 percent) believe that ASPA should serve as an advocate to promote the public service. This includes activities such as drafting ethics legislation, offering training, and/or speaking out when officials act (un)ethically. Over one-quarter of the sample (28.7 percent) see the society in a consulting mode: developing agency-specific codes and encouraging their adoption through technical assistance, convening symposia, and/or creating curricula. A small group (6.1 percent) prefer that the association act in the capacity of an evaluator: appraising agency programs and rating them against ASPA standards, tracking unethical practices, and recognizing (un)ethical conduct. Finally, most of those responding to the open-ended choice (5.8 percent) approved either a combination of the roles or all three of them.

- I believe that ASPA should adopt a gradual process by first becoming an advocate, then a consultant, and finally an evaluator, much like the current law enforcement agency accreditation process. (A Florida law enforcement investigator).
- Start by promoting, be available to consult, and evaluate upon request. (The finance director and tax administrator of an Ohio city).
- All organizations are in need of roles 1, 2, 3 at sometime in their growth; ASPA should adapt to their needs. (A budget analyst in a Maryland county).

In short, a large majority of these administrators support ASPA ethics programs and would like them extended in an advocacy, consulting, and/or evaluative mode. The code is not seen as an alternative to creating an ethically-sensitive organizational culture. They acknowledge that problems are inevitable, and that further
measures to assist decisionmakers are desirable. Frequent questionnaire comments approve the continued emphasis and steady focus on ethics as a top priority. Indeed, 60 percent support the creation of an ethics section in the society (8 percent oppose, with the remainder undecided). If the ethics section is established, 20 percent would join (making it the organization's largest section), 49 percent are undecided, and the rest would not join.

This study, to summarize, offers empirical data on ethical issues in public management and their implications for related professional associations. The respondents indicate that ethics is hardly a farad and that government has the obligation to set the example in society. They further hold that ethics in the workplace can be empowering, although not all organizations and their leaders have a consistent approach to accomplish this. The findings emphasize the key role of leadership—both by its presence and absence—in encouraging honorable public service. There is also a belief that properly-designed codes of ethics have a crucial role in fostering integrity in agencies. In fact, ASPA's code now enjoys widespread support and use among the participants in the study. Most think that a professional organization can further nurture ethics in an advocacy, consultative, or evaluative manner.

Clearly administrators think there is a genuine need for ethical guidance in the conduct of government—perhaps in response to reform movements that seek to hold public servants accountable for results instead of conformity to rules. The broad, deep consensus on the importance of ethics among these ASPA practitioner members suggests that the approaches discussed here can be meaningful when institutionalized through authentic agency leadership and professional association initiatives. As a new millennium approaches, there is reason to believe that a winter of despair is waning and a spring of hope is dawning.

James S. Bowman is professor of public administration at Florida State University. His articles on ethics, quality management, and personnel administration have been published by leading professional journals. Bowman is a former National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration Faculty Fellow, as well as a Kellogg Foundation Fellow. The editor of Public Integrity Annual, his most recent book (edited with Donald C. Menzel) is Teaching Ethics and Values in Public Administration (SUNY Press, 1997).

Russell L. Williams is a Ph.D. student and graduate assistant at the Askew School of Public Administration and Policy, Florida State University. He received a B.S. degree in journalism from the University of Kansas (1972) and an M.A. degree in national security affairs from the Naval Postgraduate School (1984). A retired career U.S. naval officer, he has extensive experience in management, policy development, and personnel training.

Acknowledgements

Appreciation is expressed to the American Society for Public Administration, the Florida State University Askew School of Public Administration and Policy, and the Florida Institute of Government for their assistance. Willa

Bruce, Jeremy Plant, Don Menzel, and Monzy Van Wart are gratefully acknowledged for their careful reading of an earlier draft.

Notes

1. While respondent self-reporting, by definition, is subjective, recall this Platonic caution: perceptions are often at least as important as facts in public life (Thompson, 1992).
2. More specifically, 88 percent are white, 71 percent are male, 77 percent hold at least a master's degree, 82 percent have over 10 years of experience, 68 percent are in mid to top management positions, 65 percent earn more than $50,000 per year, 53 percent indicate a "moderate" philosophy (23 percent say they are liberal; 21 percent conservative), and 62 percent have been ASPA members for at least six years. Their employers are state (22 percent), the federal government (20 percent), and local (55 percent); the remainder are undetermined.
3. This group does not differ substantially from the 1989 sample and, similar to that study, few cross-tabulations on these factors yielded interesting findings. Thus, data manipulation is rendered problematic by the homogenous nature of the sample; the few differences that did emerge were not notable as attitudinal trends were all in the same direction.
4. A test for nonresponse bias in population samples comparing early and late returned questionnaires (Oppenheim, 1966) was conducted, and no significant differences emerged; thus the typical participant reflects the practitioner members at large (most ASPA members are practitioners as just 10 percent are academicians). Still, the response rate raises questions about ethical concern in the ASPA membership as well as that of the larger practitioner community. That is, by their very membership in this professional organization, members and survey participants may be more sensitive to professional values and ethical conduct than nonmembers. And yet, less than two-thirds of the sample responded.
5. Further, over 60 percent disagree in both surveys that "discussing ethics with most managers is difficult because they are concerned with appearing too idealistic or "Sunday-schoolish." It appears that ethics may not be more laughable than laudable in the hurly-burly of organizational decision-making.
6. When the 1996 survey is compared with the earlier one (when over 75 percent of the respondents endorsed a similar statement), however, it appears that there is a growing emphasis on individual responsibility. The fact nonetheless remains that agencies significantly affect behaviors of their employees.
7. This is consistent with a finding by the International City/County Management Association that 90 percent of its members felt that one of the benefits of belonging to that organization was that it promoted and enforced high ethical standards (Kellar, 1995).
8. It should be pointed out that the 1984 code made no mention of enforcement. While not a formal provision of the 1995 code, there is a statement at the end that indicates it will be enforced in accordance with ASPA bylaws (Article I, Section 4). The inclusion of the statement occurred late in the approval process, was subject to little ASPA-wide debate, and was disregarded in a definitive interpretation of the code (Van Wart, 1996).
9. Since this long-standing bylaw has seldom, if ever, been utilized, its appearance in the new code was in symbolic recognition of the enforcement issue—with the understanding that it was not likely to be used. Perhaps this is one explanation for why there is little change between 1989 and 1996 in the responses to this item.
10. Should the society pursue the enforcement issue, the results to the questions below—all of which confirm those found in 1989—may provide some direction. First, 80 percent of the administrators agree that "the greater congruence of a code with pre-existing values of employees, the greater its effectiveness." It appears that any enforcement role should be preceded by an effort to articulate the national code with that of the agency.
Secondly, as before, over 80 percent endorse the idea that a policy providing "a mechanism for reporting violations that includes protection for the person reporting the problem will be more effective than one which does not have such a mechanism" (4 percent disagree; 11 percent are unsure). Thus, these survey participants believe that a code must provide clear procedures to channel communication and also to safeguard employees from harassment. Finally, a large plurality (48 percent) agree that "the greater the provision of sanctions in a code for noncompliance, the greater its effectiveness" (24 percent were undecided; 25 percent disagreed), a finding reflecting the uncertain role of a professional association. These results provide support for Weller's (1988) hypotheses on the effectiveness of codes.

8. Note that the largely inspirational International City/County Management Association code nonetheless has a workable enforcement mechanism. The association's deputy executive director writes that "While the inspirational value of a code of ethics cannot be minimized, a code is meaningless without a consistent and vigorous enforcement process." (Kel- lar, 1955, 37)

9. Bruce (1996, 29) found a statistically perfect correlation between having a professional code and finding it helpful.

References


