Codes of ethics are of little values unless they are put into action to counteract conflicts and threats in specific or any situation. This is a complex area that requires an understanding of the underlying professional guidance. A balance of assessment of the situation, an awareness of the need to do the right thing and the need to be seen to do so to maintain public trust and of course careful judgement and discretion when weighing up possible course of action. As such, there may be no single right thing to do. As long as actions are reasonable and defensible in terms of the criteria above, they are very likely to be justifiable. Ethics is a system of moral values around what constitutes ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, and that guides our behaviour. Ethics and ethical behaviour has been discussed since the ancient philosophers and has a wide range of applications and meanings.

There are basically two prominent approaches to ethics in public sector organisation which are meant to aid government officials – from the very low level to ministers and chief executives – in their decision-making and everyday business. The rules-based ethics concerns judging whether an action is right or wrong based on its adherence to a set of rules. Rule-based ethics works on a system of absolutes; e.g. killing is always wrong, regardless of your position, situation and belief of the outcome. It is an appealing system for some organisations and government institutions as it is straightforward and easy to apply and police.

Threats to ethical behaviour may be created by a broad range of relationships or circumstances. When relationship or circumstances creates a threat, such threat could compromise, or be perceived to compromise, a public servant’s compliance with the fundamental principles. A circumstance or relationship may create more than one threat, and a threat may affect more than one fundamental principles when immoral actions take precedent. This illustrates why many ethical codes should now go beyond a simple rules-based approach, as in the case of the ‘Good Governance’ code which states that compliances are not enough in itself, but the spirit of the code must also be adhered to.

Rather than focusing on a set of rules and absolutes, principle-based ethics judges actions based on their adherence to wider principles such as a sense of justice, kindness, or moral duties and obligation. The appeal of a principle-based system of ethics is that it will cover all actions, regardless of whether these actions are specifically mentioned in the rules. It may also be more powerful than a solely rule-based system, as people are more likely to understand and agree with the reasons why something is right or wrong; the system encourages them to develop these principles and apply them to all decisions.

The drawback of a principle-based system is around subjectivity. What one person believes is the kindest or most just action may not be what the next person would do in the same situation, and this makes it harder to monitor than rule-based system. For example, one person’s principles around justice may cause them to support the death penalty for certain violent crimes, while someone else’s principles around the sanctity of life may cause them to oppose these penalties.

The vast majority of organisations and professions whether private or public should have some form of ethical code, which should seek to guide the behaviour of individuals. For example, the public sector tends to place great emphasis on a principle-based system. The term ‘public sector ethos’ suggest that working in the public sector and serving the populace requires a certain selfless mind-set. A mind set which should associate with a wish to work in government or other public bodies due to a desire to ‘make a difference’ to the society at large and not for their own pocket. It should be stressed at this stage that a code of ethics is meaningless unless an individual has an underlying honesty that will make them comply with the code, rather than seek to bend or circumnavigate it. Call this the ‘Honest Person Rule’ or not but in the light of this observation, it is interesting to note that ‘Honesty’ is mentioned as a key trait in the Civil Service Code, the Ministerial Code and many other public sector frameworks internationally.

Problems around individual ethics may arise where there are conflicts within organisations or governmental departments. This can be seen in the doctrine of Cabinet collective responsibility; the convention states that if an individual Cabinet member cannot support a Cabinet action (i.e. if their ethics conflicts with Cabinet’s ethics), they should resign. But these may only be seen as a concept in some countries.

The intention of good governance, ethics and codes are to highlight to individuals the prevailing values of the organisation or sector concerned, and what the organisation or sector perceives as ‘right’ or ‘wrong’. It is difficult to make these codes entirely prescriptive, but they should provide some guidance to individuals who are struggling with an ethical problem, and perhaps assist them to develop guiding principles and values that will apply to all areas of their professional activity. As noted above, these codes may be meaningless if the individual is not honest enough to attempt to apply them in the spirit in which they are meant.

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