

Mapping the Ethics Network in English Local Government

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This paper seeks to conceptualise ethics leadership in English local government. It will demonstrate that there are a number of stakeholders within the ethical framework for English local government, all of whom have a potential leadership role to play. It will further argue that traditional models of ethical leadership do not fully encompass this diversity of leadership sources, which can be better addressed through a framework of collective decision making and collaborative action. In so doing, the paper will draw together ethical leadership with other strands of public management leadership theory. After defining the concept of ethical leadership, the paper will map out the ethics network in local government and will categorise stakeholders into different groups. The ethics map will then be discussed in terms of relational leadership and communities of practice. It concludes by offering strategies for future research

Raktažodžiai: *etika, etinis vadovavimas, vietos valdžia.*

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Introduction

This paper will focus on the key issue of ethical leadership in English local government, which has so far only been touched upon by a limited amount of research. The paper will map the 'ethics network' in English local government – the individuals and organisations that have a leadership role within the development of ethics and standards – and suggest that ethics leadership is more widely dispersed than is currently recognised. Recent research has indicated that there are a number of sources of ethical leadership within English local government, including political leaders, chief ex-

ecutives, monitoring officers and other senior officers (Greasley et al, 2006: 48). Other research has suggested that these multiple sources of ethics leadership can be categorised into two types: political leadership and managerial leadership (Morrell and Hartley, 2006).

This paper will build upon such discussions and show that, first, sources of ethics leadership are much more diffuse. Leaders can be identified at the sub-local authority level (for example, standards committees); at the central government level (for example, the Department for Communities and Local Government (formerly the Office of Deputy Prime Minister)); and also in national independent organisations (for example, the Committee for Standards in Public Life, the Standards Board for England). This paper contends that such widespread leadership constitutes an ethics network, and by mapping the network the paper will demonstrate that current models of ethical leadership are difficult to apply to English local government.

The second aim of the paper is to offer a number of ways in which ethics leadership can be ca-

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tegorised, expanding the current distinction of political and managerial. The network can also be viewed in terms of governmental and non-governmental leaders, which has an impact on the way in which potential conflicts may be perceived. Similarly the network can be divided into national and local stakeholders whose perceptions of the ethics agenda in local government mirror other issues in public sector leadership literature (see for example, Crosby and Bryson, 2005; Currie et al, 2005; Leach and Wilson, 2002).

The third aim of this paper is to argue that traditional models of ethical leadership are not suitable for analysing the current dispersed leadership in English local government. It will suggest that the ethics network be viewed in terms of a community of practice in which leadership is not only an externalised role but an internalised process of socialisation and learning, which is particularly appropriate to the contested nature of ethical debate. It will therefore suggest that the most immediately useful models of leadership with which to interpret this framework are relational and the paper will provide a number of potentially viable models, including collaborative models (Crosby and Bryson, 2005; Yukl, 1999; House and Adtja, 1997) and distributive (Gronn, 2002).

The paper is largely conceptual, drawing upon recent research and theories of leadership to argue that there are still many avenues of research in terms of ethics leadership in English local government. It will not go into any historical depth about the history of ethics in English local government; that story has been outlined several times in recent years (for example see Macaulay and Lawton, 2006; Lawton and Macaulay, 2004; Doig and Skelcher, 2001). Instead it will look at one particular factor and offer a framework – relational ethical leadership – upon which future research can be built.

1. Ethical Leadership

Although ethical leadership is a burgeoning field of academic enquiry, some argue that it remains a relatively under-researched concept: one survey found that out of 1800 articles on leadership only a small number dealt with ethical leadership in anything other than a tokenistic way (Ciulla, 1995; see also Rickards and Clark, 2006). Ethical leadership has been generally discussed as part of the broader field of leadership and has touched upon a variety of theoretical bases, most notably

transformational leadership. One of the issues facing researchers is that the term ‘ethical leadership’ is used in a variety of ways: it can be used to denote the ethical standpoint of a particular leader or the way in which leadership can be used to promote a particular view of ethics. This paper uses the term ethical leadership to denote leadership of a specific ethical agenda.

Research becomes rarer still when put in the specific contexts of UK public sector leadership and local government. Van Wart’s (2003) survey of public sector leadership literature demonstrates how little has been specifically dedicated to ethics. Some studies (e.g. Lawton et al, 2005) have touched upon ethical leadership roles within local government as one aspect of a broader study but there are few specific treatments. More recently (Greasley et al 2006) specific aspects of ethical leadership were identified in terms of their impact upon the ethical environment of an organisation.

Ethical leadership has also, perhaps surprisingly, been left behind in some recent public discussions. The Committee on Standards in Public Life’s (2005) tenth report, for example, looked extensively at the ethics network in UK local government but did not address any leadership issues; indeed, the word “leadership” appears a mere thirteen times in a report that is over 60, 000 words long.¹

Many commentators argue that even when it is not expressly stated in the literature leadership and ethics are inextricably linked. Leadership is necessary to instil an ethical culture within an organisation (Sims, 2000) and in particular when a cultural change needs to be implemented to reconfigure organisational culture (Schermerhorn Jnr and Dienhart, 2004). Ciulla (2006: 17) suggests that “leadership is morality magnified”. The ethical problems faced by leaders in organisations are no different to the problems we all face as moral individuals but the stakes are higher: more is expected of leaders and their ability to make the

¹ This does not mean, of course, that discussions on public sector leadership are scarce; there is a wealth of literature that points to a number of specific problems for public leaders. First, leaders in the public sector have to work within a much more tightly regulated legislative framework (Currie et al, 2005). Second, public sector leaders need to balance managerial effectiveness with (often contradictory) social goals and objectives (Leach and Wilson, 2002). Third, public sector leaders are increasingly working with partner organisations in order to deliver services (Crosby and Bryson, 2005). This paper suggests that all three of these problems can be found in the local government ethics network.

ethically correct decision (see also Ciulla, 2001). Others suggest that the ethics and integrity of leaders are what give their ideas and vision legitimacy and credibility (Mendonca, 2001).

But what is it, precisely, that leaders are leading in when it comes to morality and ethics? Ethics is a nuanced arena of debate that leaves itself open to a broad range of interpretations (indeed, this is the reason that some commentators feel it dovetails so well with business and management; Minkes et al (1999: 328), for example, argue that management concerns itself with “ought” questions, which are not black or white and are beyond simple regulations, law, and profit). Perhaps the most important factor to note at the outset is the fact that leaders may operate from completely different ethical perspectives. Consequentialists will look to the moral value of the outcomes of their actions; deontologists will focus more on the motivation behind the action. More likely, leaders will seek a balance of the two and attempt to do well while also doing good.

In the literature, ethical leadership has most commonly been associated with transformational models of leadership. Parry and Proctor-Thomson (2002), demonstrate that Burns’s (1978) original model of transforming leadership was promoted as developing higher ethical and moral understanding within leaders. Bass’s (1985) transformational model continued this line of argument, although Bass also highlighted that some leaders could become so transformational that their leadership could actually have the opposite effect: a leader’s vision can be so strong as to be absolutist and therefore breed unethical behaviour and history is, of course, full of leaders who displayed excessive charisma and created followers who would commit morally reprehensible acts.

Bass and Steidlmeier (1999) developed this idea further by categorising transformational leadership into two ethical types: *authentic*, which demonstrates genuine moral capacity and *pseudo-transformational*, which displays the behaviours of a transformational leader but towards self-interested ends (glory, personal power, individual financial reward, etc.). Authentic transformational leadership ignores the self and is always ultimately concerned with the development of followers and the needs of the organisation: with this approach, leaders transform their followers by activating higher order needs, emphasizing the value of certain outcomes, and influencing their followers to put the organisation before their own self-interests (Carlson and

Perrewe, (1995: 4) cited in Parry and Proctor-Thomson (2002) p. 79).

Similarly, Sosik (2005) discussed the charismatic leader’s ability to influence values, an argument also made by Grojean et al (2004), and Lord and Brown (2001). Such arguments have led to the development of models such as the Perceived Leadership Integrity Scale (PLIS) to measure the relationship between the perceived ethical behaviour of a leader with his or her effectiveness in the role (Parry and Proctor-Thomson, 2002), a relationship that is sometimes stated as simple fact: “a good leader is an ethical and effective leader” (Ciulla, 2001; p. 315). A similar model was used in recent research conducted into the ethical leadership of politicians in English local government (Morrell and Hartley, 2006).

Other studies have sought to demonstrate the particular ethical behaviours that transformational leaders engage in. Trevino et al (2003), for example, identify seven characteristics of ethical leadership: an outward oriented people focus that seeks to develop followers; high visibility of good conduct by leader; open communicators and good listening skills; set standards of themselves and others while lapses in conduct are not tolerated; leaders are always accountable; the decision making process is highlighted as an end in itself; and, ethical leaders have a broader understanding of issues and a greater ethical awareness of concepts such as the common good (an element that may have particular resonance for public managers).

While less common some commentators have identified the ethical aspects of the transactional leadership model. Kanungo (2001), for example, suggests that as transactional leaders employ a range of influencing strategies they inevitably invoke ethical dimensions to their behaviours – whether through the use of formal authority or informal power. Ciulla (2001) similarly highlights the importance of ethics in transactional leadership.

2. The local government ethics network

This paper suggests, however, that such concepts of ethical leadership are of only limited use in discussing English local government because its potential leadership is so dispersed. One report has recently alluded to this point, and identified a number of key stakeholders who have a leadership role in the ethics agenda: the political leader; the chief executive; the monitoring officer; and other chief officers (Greasley

et al, 2006). This paper suggests that there are far more potential leaders than this and Figure 1 below illustrates the various stakeholders that go to make up

the local government ethics network, all of whom arguably have some form of leadership role arising from the Local Government Act 2000.

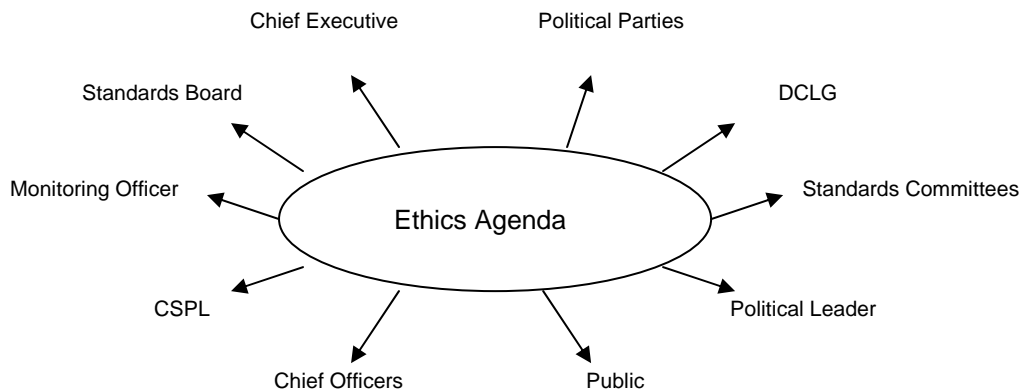


Figure 1: The local government ethics network

Central government (particularly the Department for Communities and Local Government) and national bodies such as the Committee on Standards in Public Life, for example, played a major role in setting the national agenda and creating the overall vision of the ethics agenda. Indeed they continue to do so with both CSPL and DCLG producing reports on the subject in 2005. The Standards Board for England has provided leadership through (among other things) issuing guidance materials, regular local roadshows and a national conference although it has stopped short of formal training.

In addition to Greasley et al's (2006) work, the importance of chief executive leadership, along with that of the monitoring officer and other chief officers (particularly Finance and Audit officers) was previously highlighted in a report commissioned by The Standards Board for England itself (Lawton et al, 2005). As well as providing the bulk of training and advice on ethical issues within a local authority the monitoring officer acts as a liaison between central bodies (particularly The Standards Board) and other local bodies, most notably the standards committee and parish and town councils. As such the monitoring officer has a ground-level leadership role in ensuring that various local stakeholders understand and support the ethics agenda. The chief executive is crucial in providing an example of ethical leadership for others to follow, as well as making strategic decisions at the local level such as the extent to which an authority may be proactive in setting its own ethics agenda. This was visible with the creation of

standards committees: despite the fact that they were only officially created with the advent of the Local Government Act 2000, 40% of local authorities had already established a standards committee by 1999 (Doig and Skelcher, 2001: 3).

Standards committees themselves have been charged with a leadership role by the NCLG, CSPL and Standards Board. The CSPL's 2005 report, for example, recommends that standards committees should be at the fore-front of all local issues, including allegations that would currently go to The Standards Board. The Standards Board itself has made a number of suggestions that would see standards committees engage in a range of functions, including: developing ethical governance frameworks and protocols for members and officers; undertaking audits of the authority's ethical performance; advising and overseeing anti-fraud and corruption strategies; advising other people and bodies on probity and ethics; providing information locally about The Standards Board for England, the Local Government Ombudsman and the authority's complaints procedure; liaising with external agencies in connection with standards committee issues.

This clearly places some of the onus for local leadership on local standards committees but current evidence suggests that the majority of committees may not yet be ready for this responsibility. Lawton et al (2005) showed that many members of standards committees agreed that it was reliant on the authority's monitoring officer for information and expertise. Indeed there is a divergence of opinion among standards committee members as to what, exactly, their role should

be, a point also made by Greasley et al (2006), who categorised standards committees into three types: watch dog, guide dog and lap dog.. Some members regard standards committees primarily as a forum for local determinations, for example, while others view its role as advisory or even as a training body (CSPL, 2005: 83).

3. Categorising the network

Dispersed leadership in the local government ethics agenda has both positive and negative facets. On the positive side, it may be argued that such a wide range of potential leadership sources opens up debate in a truly contested arena. More negatively it could be argued that the contested nature of ethics needs more stringent leadership on order to create a vision, attain ownership and help to foster agreement between stakeholders.

These difficulties were brought into sharp relief in the Standards Board's (2005) review of the local government code of conduct. The review received over 1200 responses from members of the public, standards committee chairs, Monitoring Officers and many other stakeholders. Although some proposed changes to the code received clear support or opposition several others (such as rules surrounding declarations, the monetary limit on gifts and hospitality; the necessity of a public interest defence for confidential information) ended up in a 50-50 split. This indicates that no matter what decision was taken by the Standards Board it would inevitably go against the wishes of approximately half of the respondents who no doubt would feel that their opinions were being overlooked. Under these circumstances it often appears difficult to gain consensus on what is and is not appropriate behaviour, and it indicates the difficulties associated with any agency (central or local) attempting to take a firm lead in such a contested area.

One way to analyse this situation further is to look at the network using a variety of perspectives. Recent research has looked at the ethical leadership of local politicians in English local government (Morrell and Hartley, 2006). This study began by categorising ethics leadership into two distinct spheres – political leadership and managerial leadership –which can be distinguished according to a number of factors: political leaders are appointed rather than selected; they have a service provision role and a regulatory role; they face conflicts of interest that do not occur in the private sector. This distinction can

readily be applied to the ethics network as outlined in the previous section. The network can also be categorised in a number of other ways, however, which indicates the difficulty in applying traditional models of leadership.

The network can be distinguished, for example, into national (DCLG, Standards Board, Committee on Standards in Public Life) and local (political leaders, standards committee, chief executive, monitoring officer) stakeholders. In terms of transformational leadership it could be argued that national stakeholders are more fully involved in setting out a vision and creating an overarching strategy for the ethics agenda. In this instance despite encouragement from national bodies, local stakeholders are more in the transactional position of managing the agenda rather than leading it. This potential tension reflects a key relationship in the history of local and central government more generally over the last three decades: that of central government dominance (Leach and Wilson, 2002).

Yet this interpretation needs further investigation. As has been noted many local authorities have been continually proactive in terms of the ethics agenda and beat the statutory requirements of the Local Government Act 2000 in terms of, for example, standards committees. Furthermore recent legislation has given rise to much more local leadership in terms of investigations and hearings. In 2005 regulations were introduced to remove investigatory powers away from eth Standards Board and hand them over to individual authorities. The most recent national reports, from the CSPL and DCLG, have both called for even greater local leadership at the strategic level.

The transformational/transactional distinction is even less substantial when other factors are taken into account. If, as De Pree argues (1989: 11): “the first task of the leader is to define reality” (cited in Caldwell et al, 2005: 153) then it should be understood that the vision for local government ethics was not created without incident. One of the key debates in the Local Government Act 2000, for example, was whether or not there was a need for a central body such as The Standards Board. The Committee on Standards in Public Life original (1997) report did not argue for such an organisation. It should be noted that more recently there has been more agreement over this issue. Last year the CSPL concluded that “The Standards Board in 2007 will need to be very different to the Standards Board in 2004” (CSPL, 2005: 81). This was pre-

cisely the same conclusion that the ODPM reached in its paper 'Standards of conduct in English local government: the future', which outlines a very different Standards Board in 2007 compared to 2004. The vast majority of investigations will now be dealt with at a local level, and the Standards Board will take on a more strategic role defining what people should expect and also roles expected of monitoring officers and standard committees and monitoring the effectiveness of local authorities.

4. Communities of practice and relational leadership

It may be useful, then, to apply models of transformational and transactional leadership at the level of specific stakeholders groups, such as Morrell and Hartley's (2006) analysis of the ethical leadership of local political leaders. On the broader level, however, it seems apparent that the blurred boundaries of ethics leadership in English local government would lend itself to a different model for investigation.

Iles and Preece (2006) argue that leadership is a social, collective and collaborative process involving relationships, networks and connections; it is not just about the competencies of an individual leader, but a shared process of enhancing collective and individual capacity to accomplish goals. The concept of a community of practice is useful here, referring to the leadership process of social learning that occurs when people who have a common interest in some subject or problem collaborate over an extended period to share ideas, find solutions, and build innovations (Wenger 1998).

Communities of practice come in to existence when people interested in a common work-related area feel a need to share what they know and to learn from others (Lesser & Storck, 2001). A community of practice is a group of people formally or informally bound together by shared expertise and interests. Whilst a community of practice "may not have an explicit agenda on a given week" even if it does, it may not follow the agenda closely (Wenger & Snyder, 2000): "Participating in a community of practice means being able to understand the boundaries of the speaker's community and, at the same time, the discourses on practice of other communities" (Gherardi & Nicolini, 2002).

Essentially the ethics network can be described as a community of practice. Its 'practice' includes the explicit (statutory obligations, legal

language, codes of conduct), as well as more implicit social relations, (individual perceptions, underlying assumptions, shared world views), which the discourse of ethics revolves around. Practice therefore, and the ethics network specifically, is ultimately produced through collaboration and mutual consent by its members who engage in the negotiation of meaning attached to each of the elements and symbols that define their community's practice. The boundary of the community is the (social) practice which remains exclusive and effectively 'owned' by those that share the same practice (Wenger, 1998).

There is potentially one problem in labelling ethics network a community of practice: the traditional notion of a community of practice is that it emerges from a work-related or interest related field that its members *volunteer* to join (Brown & Duguid, 1991). In the case of the ethics network, many stakeholders are obliged to partake in changes at the national or local level. In terms of leadership, however, it can be argued that the extent to which each member embraces and develops his or her own role is a voluntary choice. Of course volunteering to become part of a community of practice involves understanding the 'meanings' associated with that particular group and, important to note, an individual can be a member of many communities as long as they can interpret the 'boundaries' associated with that community and be aware of implications of belonging to different communities of practice:

The concept of a community of practice ties in with other strands of public management leadership theory, namely collaborative action (Yukl, 1999; House and Adtja, 1997) and distributive practice (Gronn, 2002). The collaborative action model suggests that all organisational members can be leaders at some time, through conjoint, synchronised agency and actions, either as spontaneous collaboration, intuitive working relationships, or as institutionalised practice, as in formal leadership teams (Yukl, 1999). For House and Adtja (1997: 457) "leadership involves collaborative relationships that lead to collective action". Distributed leadership is characterised by interdependence and the complementary overlapping of responsibilities, and co-ordination and the management of interdependencies (Gronn, 2002). Distributed leadership can be delegated, co-leadership, or peer leadership. In both models it can be argued that leaders are not solitary figures, but are rather members of a community of practice (Drath and Palus, 1994).

Recent studies on ethical leadership in the private sector have also indicated a concern for relational leadership. Maak and Pless (2006), for example, argue that all leadership is ultimately concerned with sustaining relations and as a result the leader needs to play a variety of roles: the moral individual; the servant; the steward; the coach, and so on. Crosby and Bryson's (2005) study of the *Leadership for Common Good Framework* suggested that ethics was crucial in relational leadership in terms of deciding between legitimate competing interests, adjudication and education of people in a collaborative team.

These models indicate specific strategies for the development of ethics leadership. In a community of practice, leadership is shared or distributed, and Iles and Preece (2006) suggest that a focus on developing individual leader competencies, as in a development centre or leadership development programme, may be useful, but is not sufficient, to transform and reconfigure the evolving relationships within which they work. Action learning among members of an ethical network, working on 'real' problems whilst also paying attention to learning and relational processes, may be useful here. Based on their analysis of a leadership programme for Chief Executives developed in the North-East of England, Iles and Preece (2006) suggest that such learning pay particular attention to processes of bonding among participants in a leadership learning network (developing bonding social capital, gaining and bolstering confidence, developing trust, knowledge and learning) and processes of bridging and brokering (developing people through exposure to new information, people and organizations) and negotiating collectively with other stakeholders outside the network, acting for each other as intermediaries.

Conclusion

Addressing English local government in a relational model accounts for the diversity and dispersal of ethics leadership in English local government more fully than using transformational or transactional models. This is not to argue that such models are irrelevant: they have a significant place in the research of specific groups within the ethics network. By looking at ethics leadership as a community of practice, however, focuses not only on the evolving role of each stakeholder, but also on the continually developing notion of the ethical agenda itself. Leadership is as much about lear-

ning as it is leading and this is particularly the case in terms of ethics.

It must be reiterated that this paper is largely conceptual but in so doing it outlines future research strategies. The first is to take existing models of relational leadership and apply them to the ethics network. Arguably the more exciting, and certainly the more challenging, strategy is to develop a new model of relational leadership designed around the specific relations and interactions of the ethics network. This paper suggests that it is a strategy that will have long term implications for academics, policy makers and ethics leaders alike.

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Anglijos vietos valdžios etikos tinklo kontūrai

Reziumė

Straipsnyje siekiama apibūdinti etikos lyderystės Anglijos vietos valdžioje koncepciją. Parodoma, kad Anglijos vietinės valdžios etikos pagrindą sudaro skirtingos interesų grupės, ir kiekviena jų turi potencialą lyderiauti šiame procese. Teigiama, kad etikos lyderystės tradiciniai modeliai nevisiškai atspindi šią lyderystės išteklių įvairovę, kurią būtų galima geriau išnaudoti kolektyvinio sprendimų priėmimo ir bendrų veiksmų dėka. Dėl to šiame straipsnyje kalbama apie etikos lyderystę kitų viešojo valdymo lyderystės teorijos krypčių kontekste. Apibrėžus etikos lyderystės koncepciją, straipsnyje pateikiami etikos tinklo vietos valdžioje struktūra bei interesų grupių skirstymas į skirtingas kategorijas. Tuomet santykinės lyderystės ir patirties bendruomenių aspektu aptariamas etikos žemėlapis. Straipsnis baigiamas pasiūlymais būsimų šios srities tyrimų strategijoms.