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Advancing Ethical Culture through Transformational Leadership for improved Public Service Delivery: Ugandan perspective

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Abstract

Fundamentally, public services must be of high quality so as to satisfy the wants and needs of the beneficiaries. But it’s worrisome to discover that in Uganda, public services provided are of poor quality due to unethical behaviors and wanting leadership. The purpose of this study is to show that transformational leadership can advance ethical culture to spur provision of quality services. A review of literature, reports and the media suggests daunting problems of unethical conducts in service delivery provision. Wanting leadership has been cited as a major contributory factor. Contextualized through exploration of transformational leadership, this study indicates advancement of ethical culture through transformational leadership can translate into quality service delivery. It recommends that government has the task of creating and advancing ethical culture through transformational leadership. Preliminary though necessitating further extensive empirical research, the study offers relevant suggestions in improving service delivery by building ethical culture through transformational leadership.

Keywords: Ethical culture; Public leaders; Public servant; Public service; Transformational leadership.

Introduction

Promotion and maintenance of a high standard of professional ethics is a requisite for quality public service delivery. It helps in clarifying right and wrong. It propels action on what is right that is, a set or system of moral principles that are generally accepted. The action to undertake must depend on the value system of the people. It requires putting people first above all else. This calls for effective consultation of the people; maintenance of a high service standard; service accessibility for all; provision of timely and accurate information; openness and transparency in all dealings; provision of timely redress where called for; and ensuring value for money. This is the spirit upon which code of conduct in public service is made.

In spite of the existence of societal principles and values to comprehend and availability of code of conduct to abide by, no public servant seems to adhere to its spirit. Aren’t they critical for public service delivery? Experience demonstrates that the general public everywhere in the world base their perception of the government on the nature and quality of services provided to them. In fact, public servants who are frontline service providers are the ‘face’ and/or voice of the government. Whenever people experience public servants to be bad and if the services provided is poor or unfriendly, then the government is immediately constituted to be inefficient and ineffective. If the service is bad, the government is bad and if the service is good, government is good; it is as simple as that. This
is the truthful picture of public service delivery the world over and it is no different in Uganda.

Unfortunately, the eyes of the public on the public service are for all the wrong reasons. Scandals involving public servants are so much pronounced that not even a bird-eye view can capture any trace of ethics in them (Vyasa-Doorgapersad & Ababio, 2006). It is true that public servants are expected to manifest professionalism and ethics, because in their absence there would, inter alia, be disorderliness and anarchy in society, retarded economic growth as investors shy away, and deterioration of trust by the people as a whole. Basically, an acceptable standard of service delivery ought to form the basis of an integral functioning of any government. But the case is quite odd in contemporary society where action in self-interest is the preoccupation of most public servants (Ermongkonchay, 2010b). It’s not strange that people perceive public service delivery as deteriorating for the collective good in exchange for personal advancement and enrichment of the public servants.

In Uganda, public service is plagued by all sorts of unethical practices (Mutebi, Kakwezi, & Nyayi, 2012). Prominent among these include lack of responsiveness to the needs of the clients, tardiness in the discharge of duties, inappropriate human resource management practices, and corruption. Others are dishonest management of public affairs; bribery; graft; patronage; nepotism; influence peddling; conflict of interest, including activities such as making financial transactions for personal advantage; and accepting outside employment during tenure in government without declaring this. Still other unethical practices are misuse of inside knowledge; favoring relatives and friends in contract award; protecting incompetence; accepting improper gifts and entertainment; and use and abuse of confidential information for private purposes. These practices cut across all levels of public service delivery in the country. According to Raiz and Haider (2010), unethical practices often start at the top of service leadership. In the current complex and changing nature of organizations, top leadership sometimes do not have strong purpose aligned to the basic principles of ethical administration (Menyah, 2010). As a result, they end up even unwilling and unable to drive their organizations to deliver acceptable public service.

In the event of leadership disorientation, the credibility of public service gets affected as in the Ugandan situation. This is seems to be the sole essence of rampant unethical behavior by public servants. Certainly, such behaviors have negative impact on the efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery. Against this backdrop, the article discusses the role of transformational leadership in building an ethical culture for improved public service. The article focuses on the possible contribution of transformational leadership toward advancing ethical culture which ultimately can translate to improved service delivery. The remaining part of the article devotes attention to literature review by discussing unethical behavior and Ugandan public service. It also highlights the impact of transformational leadership in perpetuating ethical culture for improved service delivery. The approach is geared towards creating a milieu of commitment toward service excellence. Policy implications shall be given within the framework of concluding the article.

**Ugandan public service, unethical behaviors and ethical culture**

It’s conventionally applauded if public servants promote public interest and not personal ones. As widely accepted, the Ugandan public service is, however, devoid of such as it is characterized by massive allegations on unethical behavior of public servants. Unethical behavior in the Ugandan public service has been documented in several studies. In a recent Inspectorate of Government survey report, lack of integrity and professionalism has been identified as the greatest impediments to effective service delivery (Ssonko, 2010). In a study, Ntayi, Eyaa and Ngoma (2010), found moral disengagement, work anomie, perceived normative conflict and socially constructed deviant behaviors exist among procurement officers in Uganda. They were also found to have adverse effects on the ethical behaviors of the officers. Irumba and Mwakali (2007), in their study on ethics and construction, cite professional negligence and poor construction practices as the cause of
fatal accidents on construction sites in Uganda. Bukuluki (2013) demonstrates that in some cultures in Uganda, stealing public funds is not immoral so long as one shares the loot with others. He further indicates that individuals shun responsibility for their corrupt actions which complicates moral issues related to corruption in the context of collectivism. It can be suggested that by mere manifestation of these unethical behaviors and practices in Uganda, public service has been negatively compromised. In its place, a culture of unethical behavior has been instituted and promoted at the expense of the ethical one.

Based on the basic premises of agency theory that informs this study, it can be suggested most public servants in Uganda act out of self-interests (Ermongkonchai, 2010a). By virtue of taking up public offices, public servants ought to conduct themselves in conformity to the principles and dictates of ethics. This means they would have to evaluate their conduct against absolute criteria and moral of human beings. The absolute criteria can be inferred from those put down in writing (e.g., legislations, circulars, standing orders, etc.) and/or individual interpretations based on the principles of right action imbued with positive values. Observance and strict following of these criteria helps to build and promote an ethical culture. In respect to public service delivery, therefore, such a culture promotes values and principles such as efficiency, professional discipline, dignity, equity, impartiality, fairness, public-spiritedness and courtesy in the discharge of duties by public servants (Mafunisa, 2008b).

Acts within the confines of societal principles and values is an imperative for the promotion of ethical culture in any society. This is more calling for public servants whose vocation is to protect and preserve public interest. In so doing, they ought to conduct themselves through collective perception of ethical events, ethical practices and ethical procedures. Unlike in Uganda where ethical issues are shrouded with setbacks caused by lack of a coordinated approach for meaningful and substantial promotion of ethical culture (Curral & Epstein, 2003). No one seems to be at the forefront be it in the Ugandan ministries, departments, agencies and local governments to spearhead the promotion of ethical culture. Presumably those-ought-to-be leaders are compromised by conflicting interest of patronage and personal aggrandizement as well as enrichment (Buscaglia & van Dijk, 2003). The seemingly rampant unethical behaviors in Ugandan public service can be attributed to wanting conduct of public servants aided by leadership (McCourt, 2007). Contributory factors of persons-to-post mismatch, lack of skills and inadequate performance standards can equally be attributed to these egoistic leaders who assume positions without due consideration of their capability and competency. This is accounted for in the actions of interconnected public servants who are engage in making no sacrifices to preserve and protect public interest (Archdichvili & Gaspanshvili, 2001). In such common scenarios, the only expectation is public service delivery output founded on the principle of the ethics of self-interest.

The issue of discrepancies in the ethical behaviors of public servants has posed a serious challenge in public service delivery in Uganda. Government organizations run by these public servants have miserably failed to associate the principles for which they were created to public interest. This is because they are ‘infested’ with persons who take personal ownership of their positions to advance selfish wealth and power creation. Incomprehensible though, perhaps it is the rural poor who bear the brunt of these unethical behaviors the more. The hopeless situation is compounded by non-functional socio-infrastructures which make it inconsiderably difficult for a sane mind to comprehend their situation. More so, there are insufficient organizational ethical policies and systems in all the government organizations in the country. This has only helped public servants to practice ethical behavior (if grain of such exists, anyway) at the individual level than at the societal level. The insubordination of public interest has negated the requirements of quality service delivery and the general desire to act in the interest of the public.

Whatever its nature, any sort of unethical behavior practiced at the top management of the hierarchy is bound to permeate the entire public service. According to Mafunisa (2008a), it’s simply explained by the fact that the leaders who put emphasis on an unacceptable standard...
of service delivery are more inclined to promote ethics of self-interest. Consequently, a leader’s own self becomes the leader’s highest value that the leader pursues his/her self interest. Thus the leader’s pursuit of self-focused attitude then protects the leader’s outcome and provides evidence of his/her stats and standing within the organization. This is not the essence of public service. It is the satisfaction of public interest which ought to be the primary function of leaders even more so that the rest of the other public servants emulate their examples. How to achieve this, transformational leadership comes in handy for which we now turn.

**Transformational leadership and service delivery**

Zhu, Chew and Spangler, (2005) intimate leadership is one of the drivers or catalysts of improved organizational performance. This implies that leadership is a tool for decision making. Rowe (2001) concurs to say leadership determines the acquisition, development and deployment of organization resources as well as conversion of these resources into valuable products and services. Good leadership is a precursor of quality service deliver. This is because public service delivery is very complex due to changing needs and demands of the public. In the circumstance, not every kind of leadership can manage to work out the school of public servants meant to implement it. The kind of leadership needed is one that can articulate new visions to motivate public servants. According to Bass and Avolio (2001), such can only be found with transformational leadership style.

A transformational leader is one who conjures up awareness, interest and boosts the confidence levels of individuals or groups with major preoccupation to get their concentration towards achievement and growth. The leader exhibits high position and confidence in the subordinates’ beliefs and gives importance to ethics and values while setting accountable standards for all actions. Turner and Barling (2002) explain that a transformational leader has more complex reasoning. It is this reasoning which enables the leader to go beyond immediate self-interest and to foresee the benefits of action that serve the collective good. A transformational leader develops his/her followers’ full potentials, higher needs, good value system, moralities and motivation. This makes the followers to unite, change goals and beliefs as well as look beyond their self-interests in order to achieve set goals. Bartram and Casimir (2007) well articulate that a transformational leader place value of development on clear vision and inspires followers to pursue the vision. This the leader does by eliciting performance beyond expectation. Furthermore, such a leader instills pride, communicate personal respect, facilitate creative thinking, and provide inspiration.

Transformational leadership has stirring course for effective and efficient service delivery. It moves public servants to exceed expected performance through ethics, for example, by indulging in extra role behavior. Its ethical content focuses on values that highlight the issue of standards endowed with committed sacrifices to achieving difficult objectives and achieving more than what is expected for the collective good. It is the moral character of a transformational leader that ought to shape public service. This enables ethical legitimacy of the value of public service to be embedded in the vision and articulation of the programs by the leader. It lays down the path for which the leader and the public servants ought to follow. Transformational leadership is therefore, devoid of unethical behavior as the case is in Uganda. This is confirmed in a study conducted by Barmerji and Krishnan (2000). They initially related transformational leadership with five ethical issues: bribery, endangering the physical environment, lying, personal gain and favoritism. These are issues which are seemed to be condoned by some kinds of leadership, for example, autocratic leadership. Instead, they found that transformational leadership is negatively related to any of these issues. This indicates that transformational leadership is more concerned with end values such as liberty, justice and equality than with mean values such as those issues.

Unethical behaviors can make public service organizations to be either under-led or over-managed as in the case of Uganda. In the like situation, the need for transformational leadership becomes so pronounced. This is
because transformational leadership focuses on doing the right thing. It directs the behaviors of public servants towards the accomplishment of the purpose of public service provision. It empowers public servants to execute their duties such that the purpose of their work becomes a “living purpose”. Keen (2001) elucidate the “living purpose” can be fueled and nurtured only by a transformational leader. He associated the “living purpose” with truthfulness, objectivity and accountability. Thus leadership of the nature is based on character and competence rather than position. It is the critical building block of quality public service delivery instead of one directed by obsessive personal ambition and selfish wealth creation.

The prevailing situation of public service delivery in Uganda requires not only critical but creative leaders. This is endowed in a transformational leader. According to Balthazard, Waldman and Warren (2008), a transformational leader provokes thinking in his/her followers. This aids in strengthening the creativity and problem solving potentials in the followers. It produces high levels of confidence, commitment and appreciations in them. This is needed in Uganda so as a culture that guides decisions and actions of public servants can be nurtured and developed. Trevino and Nelson (2004) contend this is the core of the culture of effectiveness and efficiency of service delivery. And it can only be realized when ethical culture is made to sprout to positively impact on the delivery of public service. A transformational leader usually “walk the talk” to achieve this for he/she spells out and enforces a single standards for improved service delivery. This is supported by Roth, et. al (2006) who claim that standards help to differentiate the acceptable and the unacceptable, as well as between ethical and unethical behaviors.

Transformational leadership is the right answer the circus of unethical behaviors among public servants in Uganda. It advocates for ethical behavior and acts as a linking element in the organization. It produces a convergent climate and atmosphere that highlights respect and trust. Its sap is integrity. Winston (2005) is of the opinion that ethics and transformational leadership are dependent on integrity. Implicitly, public services delivery requires persons with an unquestionable integrity. Those of whom every action is informed by morals, rules and principles acceptable to society. Where leaders are of questionable integrity, they cannot toe the line of ethics consequently unethical behaviors prevails.

Saturated with no transformative outlooks such leaders can never bring followers on board to appreciate quality public service. Obicci (2014) avers performance of the employees depend on whether their leader promotes ethical culture or not. This means leaders ought to develop the consciousness of acting ethically with their minds filled for the collective good. It’s incumbent upon all leaders in the chains of public service delivery to promote an ethical culture in their organizations. An ethical culture inculcates the spirit of ethical behavior. It’s the behavior that makes a rational and conscious attempt to formulate the principles governing good and bad, or right and wrong about public service (King, 2007).

For public servants to behave ethically, leaders ought to understand that the character of ethics is awakened in the individual only through the observation and conduct of an ethical person. Thus public service requires transformational leaders who can be models and mentors. This is based on four principles. First, people learn to conduct themselves primarily through the actions of significant other persons. This means public servants observe and models their behaviors, attitudes, and emotion according to those of their leaders (van Der Waldt, 2004). For example, in Uganda, through observing their leaders, public servants have formed their ideas of how unethical behaviors can be practiced, and they then use this encoded information in their daily actions as a guide for unethical decisions and behavior. Secondly, when the behaviors of others is reiterated often enough and proves to be positive, some may emulate these actions. Thirdly, when individual’s actions are in turn constructively reinforced by others, they might become acquired characteristics and behavioral habits. It appears therefore, the missing links in the Ugandan cases are to be found somewhere between public service delivery and the individual leaders in these public service organizations.
Policy implications

Provision of public service delivery is an ethical calling that ought to be embedded in a thriving environment that not only sets the pace but also outlines actions to be taken by public servants. In any form of public service delivery, provision must be regulated in the interest of all, with a view of promoting the general welfare. Public servants are appointed and/or elected to serve members of the public and not to promote private and own interest (Lues, 2007). In public service there is no need for maximization of self interest, cronies’ joint interest, and self-determined ethical prediction (Jones, et. al. 2007).

The clearest purpose of public service delivery is the foundation upon which sound ethical behavior is built. This is premised on the understanding that public goods and services are to be provided to satisfy clearly defined public needs and demands. This means their delivery must be based on the principle of the collective good by focusing attention away from the self to the public. It requires public leaders to promote efficient and effective service delivery provision. In addition, they are to apply good behavior and competencies (van der Waldt, 2004) in their conduct. A distinctive feature of public leaders is that they are expected to be highly professional, that is, combining public service values with the values and standards of the profession itself. These values should be captured in the performance of public leaders such as their quality of work (Vyas-Doorgapers & Ababio, 2006). This endears them to perform only tasks relevant to the needs and demands of the citizens. It requires them to give meaning to efforts and goals by connecting to public values. Once this is done, it can be appreciated that values are likely to reflect, at least in part, the dominant values of society. This is the surest mean through which transformational leadership can have a meaning by providing space for ‘moral involvement’ of even public servants in service delivery provision.

Current challenges of the globalized world which occurs every minute in terms of change calls for the cultivation of the spirit of transformation. Unfortunately as observed in the preceding sections, many public service organizations are led by those who fall far below average in observing the tenets of the principles of transformational leadership. According to Naidoo and Xollie (2011), leaders in public service organizations ought to bear in mind, they lead organization institutions which constitute the essential part of service delivery. This calls for resistance to the promotion of erratic unethical practices and behaviors in these institutions if the needs and demands of the public are to be met. It is important that the government hires people with ethical minds who have no void for collective good. This makes transformational leadership as sine quo non of quality service delivery. And it is anchored on the fact that transformational leadership involves higher quality goods and services, personal development, higher levels of satisfaction, direction and vision, innovation and creativity and an invigorating organizational culture based on ethics (van Wart, 2003).

Transformational leadership creates and promotes an enabling environment that heightens the urge for a sense of belonging which enhances organization’s productivity to achieve the formulated objectives. This necessitates specification and clarification of the goals of the organization by the public leader. It gives a leeway for the led to carry out consensual way of measuring their performances. In the absence of a clear pathway of transformational leadership, the led are more likely to look for self-related justifications for their efforts, and thus become more prone to the influence of unethical behaviors and practices (Jones, Felps & Bigley, 2007). A transformational leader should therefore, develop strategies that effectively express the mission statement of the organization. Likewise, the structures and systems in place must recognize the vision of the organization and even the management style must be cognizant and consistent with the mission statement of the organization (Rowe, 2001).

Modeling through transformational leadership has a powerful influence on public servants personifying the values of public service. This view is supported by Malan and Smit (2001) who view behavior of transformational leadership as the basis upon which trust, credibility, and communication is designed. This suggests that
leaders who do not benchmark their actions against purpose, values and standards cannot expect to impart purpose and higher expectations to others. Much as policy and regulatory frameworks may set guidelines for ethical behavior, it is imperative that public leaders structure and implement strategies to ensure that decisions relating to service delivery are made within an ethical milieu. This is the basis upon which focuses should be directed to produce acceptable results.

Plagued with unethical behaviors and practices, public service organizations urgently need transformational leaders more than before. There is a need for a conscious, moral and spiritual process that provides patterns of equal power relationship which can only be induced by a transformational leader (Magliocca & Christakis, 2001). The power relationship enables the fulfillment of collective purpose or making a genuine reform in the organizations by a reliable participatory plan. This promotes a sense of commitment, voluntary participation and remarkable efforts by the public servants. As a result, public servants will be able to develop their full potentials, higher needs, good value systems, moralities, and motivation. When this development occurs, public servants will unite to change goals and beliefs and look forward beyond their self-interests in order to achieve public interest.

Public leaders need to be motivated by altruism. It is through altruism that they can be tuned to effectiveness by showing selfless concern for the welfare of the public, and seeking the good of the public even to their own disadvantage. Altruism also entices them to create an environment of cooperation and trust in which it is easier to learn, experiment, participate, discuss or take risks. According to Alegre and Chiva (2013), such environment is very necessary for quality performance. The transformational leader would therefore, be able to harness service and thinking of the led, thus creating a culture of high performance. Thus creating a climate for these traits to develop is to a large extent dependent on the leader who has a sense of responsibility, service and energy field to inspire and motivate beyond personal interest.

**Recommendations**

It’s clear, successful and sustainable performance in any public service organization is linked to effective leadership approaches, the capabilities and capacity of the leader. It is arguable that quality public service can be more viable and better able to fulfill the needs and demands of the public; if a transformational leadership spirit is followed. Transformational leadership would promote greater quality service delivery than any kind of leadership. It is therefore, recommended that public service organizations in Uganda, should encourage basic training skills for public servants to carry out official duties. Such training may include financial management so that public servants are able to manage own finances. The government needs to introduce career system based on merit appointments. This is because the process of building a public service cadre ought to form the major tasks of creating a developmental state. There is need to have a well-articulated and fair human resource policies on remuneration and conditions of service. This also requires training and development programmes to be implemented as planned.

Every effort must be made by all public service organizations to ensure that there is timely and frequent recognition of good work through incentives and correction of poor performance, thus nurturing professionalism and pride. The code of conduct for public servants needs to be legalized which will then be enforced against misconduct ranging from unethical to criminal acts. Institutions and organs of government, for example, disciplinary and sanctions committees in Ministry, Departments and Agencies need to be strengthened, in terms of human capacity to investigate unethical conduct. Compliance with the leadership code Act need to be strengthened in all public service organizations and to all categories of public servants regardless of ranks and positions. There must be total discouragement of dual employment since this pose a threat to honesty, especially in procurement related issues. Exemplary leadership and political will are needed to instill ethics and professionalism because at times the problems start from the top and permeate the whole public service organizations. It’s very common that junior
public servants take advantage of such positions. Every public servant must be seen to promote public interest. They must put people first, that is, treat the public as customers as the case is in the private sector where the customer is seen as always right. This entails consulting and involving the public in all the chains of service delivery provision. The public ought to be treated with courtesy and be given all the necessary information they require.

Public servants must be open and transparent in all their dealings. A high standard needs to be set in which the performance of public servants are constantly measured vis a vis the extent to which the public are satisfied with the services or products that they receive. There is need to emphasize a need to identify quickly and accurately when services are falling below the promised standards so as to have a procedure in place to remedy the situation. It’s an ethical calling for public servants to contribute in ensuring a positive image of the public service and enhanced service delivery. This is the parameters for building the public and investors’ confidence in the public service which will eventually lead to efficient and effective utilization of resources. 

Lues (2007) sums it all when he advises that public service organizations need to provide continuous commitment, enforcement, and modeling leadership in professional ethics. He continues to say that public leaders should realize the importance of changing their personal mindsets and accept the ethical standards that are supported by the public, which might differ from their own beliefs and cultures. This helps to instill a new culture of ethics in these organizations.

There is an urgent need to advance ethical culture in all public service organizations in Uganda. This entails adopting a strategy composed of collective perception of ethical events, ethical practices, and ethical procedures (Martin & Cullen, 2006). The strategy can be smoothened through laws, regulations and professional code of conduct as viable tools (Rosenblatt & Pelde, 2002). In essence, the strategy must enable promotion and maintenance of a high standard of professional ethics; be developmental-oriented; promote efficient, economic and effective use of resources; provide impartial, fair, equitable services without bias; respond to people’s needs by encouraging them to participate in policy making; build an accountable crops of public servants; fosters transparency through timely, accessible and accurate information; and maximize human potentials. Mle (2012) contends public managers must operate within prescribed guidelines unto which they must cooperate and administer and direct the public service. It’s incumbent upon the public leaders to place followers on the right track precisely to eliminate unethical behaviors.

**Conclusion**

This study investigated problems associated with ethical issues in public service organizations in Uganda. This was done with the lens of transformational leadership models within the realm of ethical culture. It is based on the premise that identifying public service delivery constraints in the country could provide a basis for assisting to reduce poor service delivery in the country. Results show that wanting leadership is the cause of unethical behaviors in public service organizations. It is an imperative factor which precludes public servants from taking the path of ethical behaviors resulting in their own indulgence in committing and perpetuating the vice of unethical behaviors in service delivery provision. Although the Ugandan public service is threatened by unethical behaviors, the paper argues that this can be done away with if the principles and spirit of transformational leadership is followed to the letter in all public service organizations. The paper therefore, argues that transformational leadership is required for advancing ethical culture in public service organizations.

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