Chapter 4
Ethical Influences of E-Government Website Development: Sustaining an Ethical Climate in Public Organizations

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ABSTRACT

Complementary and competing values of political, legal and public interest issues define administrative ethical decision-making in public organizations. Organizational values create an ethical climate that prescribes acceptable ethical norms of behavior. The relationship between technology and administrative governance can influence and shift organizational values that affect the ethical climate in public organizations. This theoretical inquiry considers how web based and Internet technology can result in value shifts in power distribution, social equity and persuasiveness of citizens as government web sites are forged. Discussions of these value shifts suggest ethical considerations in decisions by public managers that focus on building an ethical climate to support democratic governance goals.

INTRODUCTION

The strength in the recognition of the use of information technology to influence organizational ethical public organizations encourages us to evaluate organizational functions with this in mind. Dr. Paula Gordon (1977) suggests an approach to value-based ethics brought on by technical rationality. Rather than the “reactive perspectives and approaches that are current today” (p.1) we need to evaluate public administration technology roles in terms of value-based ethics.

Science should be a tool that frees man, not a tool that leads to his subjugation, or as Thoreau warned, that ‘makes man a tool of his tools.’ Science should be used in human ways to meet human needs, not in ways that deny, show disdain for, and effectively destroy man’s freedom, man’s spirit, man’s intrinsic humanness, and the very meaning of his life. Science should not be used
Complementary and competing values of political, legal and public interest issues define the administrative ethical decision-making in public organizations (Van Wart, 1998). Political authority infers public ownership, which in turn provides a distinctively different approach to organizational control from that of private organizations. For example, the economic resources for public organizations come from legislative bodies that reach collaborative agreement based on their policy decisions.

Law creates public organizations to carry out policy and administer the law. These legal principles create values of subordination to elected and appointed officials, the law, legislative intent, and the courts (Van Wart, 1998). While managers in private organizations can act, unless a law or rule prescribes otherwise, compliance with laws in public organizations is compulsory (Erakovich, Kavran & Wyman, 2006).

Public interest requires systematic democratic governance, division of political and administrative power through federalism and protection of individual rights from governmental abuses. Public interest suggests an implicit agreement on decision-making that resolves questions of what is the common good and in the public interest partially through the free market and partially through representative government. Public interest suggests an implicit agreement concerning the rules of conduct and decision-making in society. (Schumpeter, 1942; Downs, 1962; Gardner, 1990)

The work of government is to facilitate the continual readjustment of competing and conflicting values and influences (Schumpeter, 1942). The environment in which a public organization works develops values that guide decision making to implement technology and the values brought about by web based technology applications. Past shifts in public organizational values have occurred with increased technological complexity and growth of society. For example, in the 1990s, technology produced a flow of information that brought new public management into the public reform efforts (Fountain, 2001) and value shifts toward a market approach to management and businesslike principles. The main contention here is that these value perspectives, while meeting the political, legal and economic influences, are based on econometric assumptions that neglect a public administration focus of democratic building and issues of plurality, equality and a public interest focus that considers all citizens (Gregory, 1999).

This paper proposes we can gain a fuller understanding of value shifts and ethics in public service by drawing from concepts built in organizational forms of inquiry. This inquiry considers how the use of e-government web based and Internet technology can result in value shifts in power distribution, social equity and persuasiveness of government web sites as they are forged. Ideas about the relationship between technology and ethical climates in public organizations are described in the organizational processes and a normative view of public administration ethics.

**Approaches to Ethical Decision Making in Public Organizations**

Public managers focus on two main objectives in managing ethics in public organizations:

1. Develop organizational systems that encourage and support ethical behavior, and
2. Provide training and orientation to support these organizational systems (Gortner, 1991).

To keep public organizations focused on public service, rather than its own special interest, the values and principles of a democratic political process in the administration of government must provide reference points. Decisions must include the legally mandated mission of the organization. However, the manager is also concerned with the
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