

Ethics in the City: How Talk about Ethics Leads to an Ethical Culture

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Abstract:

A study by Spoma Jovanovic (University of North Carolina, Greensboro) and Roy Wood (University of Denver) set out to explore communication about ethics to see if there are ways of talking that do make a difference and to explore how an ethics initiative might work to create an ethical culture in government. For almost five years the team studied the ethics initiative in Denver, Colorado. During that period, they observed hundred of hours of meetings, conducted formal and informal interviews, executed surveys and focus groups, and reviewed public records all courtesy of the Colorado Open Records Act.

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Article:

[Image Omitted]

Democracy depends upon trust in public officials; yet, trust in government has been steadily falling as instances of local, state, and federal corruption fill the pages of our newspapers. According to Robert Putnam, author *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, three out of four Americans simply do not trust the government to do what is right most of the time. So cities and states across the country have adopted ethics codes and created ethics boards in the hopes that citizens will be satisfied that public servants are taking ethics seriously. And yet, we know that talking about ethics does not always lead to ethical action. Often times it does not. But, very intriguing, often times it does.

A study by Spoma Jovanovic (University of North Carolina, Greensboro) and Roy Wood (University of Denver) set out to explore communication about ethics to see if there are ways of talking that do make a difference and to explore how an ethics initiative might work to create an ethical culture in government. For almost five years the team studied the ethics initiative in Denver, Colorado. During that period, they observed hundred of hours of meetings, conducted formal and informal interviews, executed surveys and focus groups, and reviewed public records all courtesy of the Colorado Open Records Act.

Talking about ethics raises questions like: What is the right thing to do? What does the code of ethics say about this? What do we do around here? Jovanovic and Wood found much of the discourse about ethics to be appropriate, but not effective. Often the discussion was theoretical, uninvolved, highly certain, but detached. Or, it was legalistic, “Is this allowed?” Sometimes it was even sarcastic. But then there were occasions when people became highly involved. Talk flew back and forth; it was practical, immediate, and about very real problems.

Interestingly, in the midst of the routine of work or training, ethics happened in dialogue between real people who really care about real issues. The ethics code, the ethics board, the peer group, and even religious training moved to the background while people demonstrated considerable care to take responsibility for crafting some kind of workable solutions to difficult or even seemingly impossible choices.

In an ethical culture, ethics is seen as an orientation to how we do business, how we interact with one another, and an expression of some set of core values. By way of example, Denver police officers face a seemingly simple decision daily—should they accept a free or discounted meal at a restaurant? No big deal, right? Wrong.

One police officer said what plenty of others in the training room concurred with, namely, “This is the only question that ever comes up [in the ranks]. It's not, here's an abortion clinic, and what do I do? It's, hey captain, can I eat out tonight?” A fellow officer added, “The reason we debate this so hotly is because we want to believe we are ethical.” The situation is complicated precisely because the various stakeholders surface competing values and concerns.

First, some restaurant owners and many citizens want to show appreciation to the police. Second, many restaurant owners and employees enjoy having officers around to make them and their customers feel safer. Third, some people want to make certain the police have a positive attitude of priority toward them should anything happen. Last, there may be some people that want to buy a blind eye from a police officer.

From a police officer's point of view, it is also complicated. When a restaurant owner is just trying to be nice, or a citizen wants to buy an officer dinner, is there a way to accept gracefully? Police officers, like most of us who are offered a rather small token of appreciation, ask, “Why be rude?” Then, if an owner refuses to give you a check what do you do? (As one business owner reportedly said, “Look, you run the police department, I'll run my restaurant.”) Finally, a police officer explained the realities of his job that most citizens would never know. He said, “If you are working the graveyard shift there may be only three or four restaurants open in the whole city. There are some places where they hate cops and someone in the kitchen spits in your food! If they offer a discount, you know they like cops.” To many on the police force, hostility from those they are trying to serve and protect is rampant. They say, quite practically, that it feels good to eat where you are welcome.

The central ethical question is who can pay for meals that officers eat while on duty. In the training session when this issue was discussed, police officers concluded that there are times when it is impractical or offensive to not accept a meal and other times when a meal should not be accepted under any circumstances. But, in general, the police determined it is a good practice for the officer to leave an amount of cash on the table equivalent to the price of the meal and the tip. They recognized that this solution was imperfect and that perhaps the server would get all the money, or maybe not. Still, it was a solution that measured the situation at hand, considered the norms and values of the city, and reflected the overriding tenets of public service responsibility.

Talking about ethics in real rather than hypothetical situations reveals people's underlying values. In so doing, talk provides a pathway toward realizing a more ethical organization. The best conversations are those that include all of the stakeholders involved—in this case police officers, their supervisors, members of the community, restaurant owners, and the Board of Ethics staff.

The simple truth is that government employees are organizational members who must make important ethical decisions routinely about seemingly mundane matters. When those decisions are based on discussions representing the broad shared interests of the community, rather than limited particular or powerful interests, ethical talk moves to ethical action.

However, and importantly, like their private sector counterparts, government ethics codes most often arise in response to some scandal or external scrutiny. When the concern for ethics is really a single-minded focus on managing financial affairs, codifying narrowly defined behaviors, or controlling strategic concerns, all too often an ethics program becomes little more than window dressing. In fact, without sustained talk about specific ethical situations, formal rules of conduct rarely stir people to ethical action beyond what is minimally prescribed.

A genuine desire to integrate ethics into a municipality's culture requires that it be fully embraced by politicians, officials, and employees. Together, they will carve out those spaces where talk is encouraged—in one-on-one discussions, in department meetings, and in ethics training sessions—to determine standards of fairness, compassion, and equality. In Denver—as with most other municipalities—politics and ethics can create tension. Yet, Jovanovic and Wood found a deserved optimism for Denver's ethics initiative built upon frequent and meaningful communication.

About the authors: Spoma Jovanovic is Assistant Professor of Communication Studies at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro; Roy V. Wood is Professor of Human Communication Studies at the University of Denver. They study the difficult but honest conversations required in business, education, government, and the community to explore what it means to live ethical lives. This essay is based on the research article: Jovanovic, S., & Wood, R. V. (2006). Communication ethics and ethical culture: A study of the ethics initiative in Denver city government. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 34, 386-405.