Chapter 1

Improving governance in the public sector: can ethics be taught?

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Introduction

The public sector is one of the largest employers in South Africa, employing close to two million people across all tiers. The executive or political heads are elected officials who are entrusted with the efficient and effective executive management of public sector institutions.

In order for the government to effectively execute and realise the primary objective of the Sixth Administration of Democratic South Africa outlined in the Medium-Term Strategic Framework (MTSF) - that of fostering a capable, ethical, and developmental state - it requires leaders who embody dedication, ethics, commitment, qualifications, and aptitude in equal measure (DPME, 2019:4).

Section 195 of the Constitution (SA, 1996:99). outlines the basic principles and values of public administration and sets a high standard of professional ethics. Amongst other values, it mentions that public administration is required to be development-oriented and utilise resources efficiently and effectively. Therefore, public officials are to conduct themselves in a way that upholds these constitutional values.

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In 2021, President Cyril Ramaphosa underlined the importance of ethical behaviour in the public sector in his State of the Nation Address (SONA) by stating that "Advancing honesty, ethics, and integrity in the public service is critical if we are to build a capable state" (Ramaphosa, 2021).

There is a national emergency, and it has become more pronounced as South Africa faces challenges of ethical leadership in both the private and public sectors. Recently, the Zondo Commission, Public Investment Corporation (PIC) Commission, and Courts of Law released reports that shed light on the conduct of public officials. There have also been several reports by the Special Investigating Unit (SIU) dealing with the same matter. This phenomenon is not unique to South Africa. There are many reports of multinational companies that have been implicated in unethical and corrupt activities. These include corporate scandals including Enron, WorldCom, Nortel, and AIG. These malfeasances have repeatedly demonstrated that corporate leaders are not immune to unethical behaviour (Bedi, Alpasla & Green, 2015; Naidoo, 2012a).

Corruption undermines public trust and diverts public funds intended for service delivery (Kekae, 2017; Malatjie, 2023). Disconcertingly, corruption impedes the achievement of governments' objectives, especially in delivering public services and advancing economic development (Kekae, 2017:1). Consequently, increased concerns about the decline of public confidence in government institutions due to unethical behaviour have prompted governments around the world to review their approaches to ethics in the public sector (Manyaka & Sebola, 2013; Sebola, 2018). Therefore, the need to promote professional ethics becomes important not only in the private sector but in the public sector as well.

Despite the implementation of the necessary legislation, incidents of unethical behaviour have continued unabated in the public sector. This has prompted the government to develop ways that aim to highlight the importance of ethics in the public sector. Raga and Taylor (n.d.) assert

that "government and society cannot promote and enforce ethical conduct and behaviour solely through the utilisation of ethical codes of conduct or through the promulgation of a plethora of legislation." It is against this backdrop that it becomes necessary to adopt ethics training as one of the important elements of fighting corruption in the public sector (Kroukamp, 2012; Manyaka & Sebola, 2013; Mollo, 2010).

The National School of Government (NSG), the training arm of the government, has introduced a compulsory online ethics programme for all public officials. The aim of the training programme is to build an ethical culture among public officials by developing their capacity for personal and professional ethical conduct (NSG, 2021). It is envisaged that providing ethics training will give effect to the constitutional principle of promoting a high standard of professional ethics in the public sector and enable the state to function more efficiently. The paper presents a qualitative study with the main aim of determining the importance of the ethics-training programme and answering the research question of whether ethics can be taught.

A note on the methodology

In order to use empirical evidence to argue the question raised in this paper, the NSG was approached to use available data. Data were collected from the NSG's Training Management System (TMS) for individuals who registered for the course "Ethics in the public service" during the period 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022. This is a free online (eLearning) course available to all public servants in South Africa. The sample consisted of 38013 participants and was reduced to 30211 learners who completed the course. Standard characteristics such as demographics, personal and occupational variables were identified. This allowed for a descriptive statistics analysis, as depicted in the results and discussion section.

After the participants completed the course, they were required to complete an anonymous satisfaction survey questionnaire. Therefore, the second set of data had no other

variables except for the questions. This strongly limited inferences from the feedback that challenged the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) in determining the long-run impacts of the course on the public service. The questionnaire had nine questions, however, only five fell within the scope of the study. In no order of importance, the following questions were asked:

Q1. The course addressed my learning needs.

Q2. The course improved my knowledge of the topics that were covered.

Q3. The learning material was applicable to me.

Q4. The learning material was relevant for my working environment.

Q5. The learning material provided me with examples of practical application.

Participants were required to give feedback on a 4-point scale (1 = Strongly agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Disagree, 4 = Strongly disagree) before they could download their certificate. Before the use of evidence, analysis, and discussion, it is important that the section be contextualised with an outline of key debates and practices on ethics in the public sector.

The section above outlines the methodology used in the study. The next section defines the meaning of ethical leadership in the public sector and initiatives undertaken so far to enhance it. In this section, definitions are added on ethics and ethical leadership beyond just the public sector.

Ethical Leadership in the Public Sector

Defining Ethics

In recent years, ethical standards within the public sector have experienced a noticeable decline. This challenge is not only unique to the public sector; but the private sector has also reported incidents of unethical behaviour that resulted in corruption. Consequently, ethical leadership is seen as a

potential solution to address corruption and a lack of moral values (Cheteni & Shindika, 2017:5).

Ethics are moral principles or standards used by organisations and human beings to govern their decision-making and behaviour. It is generally used in combination with norms and values to determine what is right or wrong (Toor & Ofori, 2009; Bedi et. al., 2016). An ethical dilemma is a scenario that requires arduous decision-making and a choice between two possible courses of action, each of which entails a partial or comprehensive transgression of moral principles. Leaders constantly face the challenge of mastering ethical dilemmas that arise within and outside of their organisations. To be effective and successful over time, leaders need to manifest optimal ethical conduct and moral standards in daily conversations, decisions, behaviour, and actions to achieve substantial follower ethical behaviour. On the contrary, leaders perceived as unethical can be destructive, dangerous, and even toxic.

Ethics pertain to individual conduct concerning what is deemed acceptable and unacceptable by society as a whole. Therefore, ethics sets standards regarding good and bad behaviour. Ethics address the conduct and character of an individual. These standards are applied to the personal and professional lives of individuals. In addition to these definitions, Amundsen and De Andrade (2009:6) define ethics as principles used to evaluate behaviour as right or wrong, good or bad, and prescribe what humans ought to do. Table 1.1 below outlines the definitions of ethical leadership:

Table 1.1: Ethical leadership definitions

"The demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making."	Brown et al. (2005:120)

Ethical leadership is defined as "simply a matter of leaders having good character and the right values or being a person of strong character".	Freeman & Stewart (2006:2)
"Ethical leadership is the integration of virtues, deontology, utilitarianism, and professional ethics to acquire competency skills which seek to benefit followers, institutions and society by living in accordance with normative values acceptable to institutions, followers and society."	Singo (2018:12)
"Ethical leadership demonstrates the will and ability to strategically position, design and sustain an organisation successfully, to develop employee competence and to direct human and organisational energy in pursuit of performance and achievement that stands the test of effectiveness and efficiency."	Van Aswegen & Engelbrecht (2009:228)
Ethical leadership is defined as "a manifestation of honesty and credibility, concern, doing the right thing, openness of communication, personal life based on morality standards, being fair in decision-making, values and ethics, punishment and reward application, and finally role modeling."	Aryati et al. (2017:245)

The above definitions indicate that leadership is a position of influence and power within the public sector, and leaders need to be consistently moral and ethical in both their personal and professional conduct (Singo, 2018:11). According to Eide, Dulmen, and Eide (2016), ethical leadership definitions commonly share themes such as inspirational motivation, concern for others, integrity, honesty, and fair-mindedness. They also involve setting standards and expectations

for appropriate and inappropriate codes of conduct, accountability, as well as rewards and punishment.

Brown et al. (2005) provide a clear definition that has two components of ethical leadership. The first categorises ethical leaders as moral individuals, specifically, as role models who demonstrate ethical behaviour. Secondly, ethical leaders are moral managers who actively promote ethical behaviour. The two qualities allow leaders to determine and communicate ethical standards and hold followers accountable for unethical behaviour. Bedi et al. (2016) assert that ethical leaders influence followers' work-related outcomes in two broad forms: directly through role modelling and indirectly through social exchanges.

In role modelling, motivation and informational means are instrumental in influencing ethical behaviour (Bandura, 1977). Leaders use role modelling to demonstrate the types of actions they seek to reward and promote. Further, leaders' behaviour is perceived as an informational guide for behaviour that is generally acceptable. In addition, social exchange processes are also found to be useful to leaders in shaping followers' ethical behaviour (Brown et al. 2005). It has been found that, "Social exchange theory proposes that the norms of reciprocity or perceived obligation to return favours undergirds many social relationships" (Blau 1964; Alpaslan, Bedi & Green 2016: 4). In terms of this theory, leaders' care and support are reciprocated well when followers perceive that a leader is caring for their well-being. On this premise, Brown et al. (2006) suggested that ethical leaders create emotions of trust and fairness in their followers, as well as an organisational environment where followers are more likely to reciprocate with beneficial organisational behaviour.

Fundamentals of Ethical Leadership

Ethical leadership pertains to elements of personal conduct that are perceived as ethically appropriate in making decisions and establishing relationships with others in a manner that others are inspired to follow. Furthermore, ethical leadership

exemplifies moral managers who lead by example and communicate moral standards, embodying moral individuals with personal qualities like integrity and honesty (Lawton & Paez, 2015). Public servants must embody qualities of good character, encompassing objectivity, selflessness, and honesty (Lawton & Paez, 2015). These are crucial in interactions with clients, consumers, or patients through beneficence and non-maleficence to advance shared interests and justice (Lawton et. al., 2013).

Leaders aim to embed their assumptions, values, and beliefs into the collective understanding of followers by influencing the shared cultural elements of a given standard and subsequently transmitting these to their followers (Schein, 1985). Schein argued that leaders achieve this by utilising primary and secondary embedding mechanisms. The primary embedding mechanisms encompass aspects that leaders can control, measure, find interesting, and use to provide rewards and status. These, inter alia, include coaching, teaching, and role modelling, which have strong direct impacts on the followers' values, beliefs, and assumptions (Schein, 2010). Avolio and colleagues propose that a " follower's perception of a leader's ethical leadership relates directly to these primary embedding mechanisms" (Schaubroeck et. al., 2012:1060).

Observations indicate that ethical leadership comprises elements of both a moral manager and a moral person. In this regard, as a moral person, a leader behaves exemplarily and leads with a caring, just, and principled approach. A moral manager or leader specifies acceptable and unacceptable conduct, establishing sanctions and rewards based on such behaviour. A leader's capacity is evaluated during what Schaubroeck et al. (2012:1069) term critical incidents, such as when a colleague's ethical transgression is brought to the leader's attention. The response to this is critical as it "is diagnostic and will influence followers' perception of the leader as a moral manager" (Schaubroeck et. al., 2012:1066).

On the opposite end, secondary embedding mechanisms may be comparatively more ambiguous and have a potentially

lesser impact than their primary counterparts. These include ethical culture, workflow designs, organisational structures, processes, and official statements from leaders. Combined, primary, and secondary mechanisms are expected to structure the common perception of ethical leadership at a unit level as a compositional construct (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000). "When individuals perceive their leader as a proponent and exemplar of ethical behaviour, they report individual and work unit psychological states that are conducive to more ethical conduct" Walumbwa et. al., (2011) as cited in Schaubroeck et. al., (2012). Chonko (2009) argues that followers are more likely to practice pro-social conduct when they perceive strong ethical leadership, and therefore less likely to demonstrate counterproductive or deviant behaviour.

Governance in the Public Sector

Good governance entails effective and efficient use of power and resources, constitutionalism and rule of law, justice and equity, and electoral and participatory democracy to redress the abuse of resources (Madue, Tsolo & Ramoabi, 2014:879). According to the Batho Pele Principles as contained in the White Paper (SA,1997:10) on transforming public service delivery:

> "Government is responsible for providing efficient, effective and economic services, accountable for quality service provision, must be transparent on how government departments are managed, provide considerate treatment of the public, share information on the quality of services provided, provide equal services to all citizens and consult with citizens about the services they are entitled to receive".

Thus, the public sector has a responsibility to the communities to deliver services as outlined above and to ensure that these principles are not compromised. Leaders in the public sector are responsible for ensuring that all public officials uphold these values and that public sector organisations deliver on their constitutional mandates. As outlined in the National

Development Plan 2030 (NDP), the government's vision is to establish a society free from corruption, served by public servants who demonstrate accountability and leaders who have both high integrity and ethical standards (NDP, 2012).

Over the years, there has been an increase in governance failures and non-compliance with legislation in several public sector organisations. Consequently, poor governance weakens an organisation's potential, eventually leading to financial irregularities stemming from fraud, corruption, and other illegal activities. Research indicates that governance is a primary factor contributing to suboptimal performance in public sector organisations (Kikeri, 2018; Malunga, 2007; Mutize & Tefera, 2020).

Ethical transgressions are not limited to the civil service or senior officials. It is simply a pandemic that transcends all sectors. Globally, one can look at the great recession and economic downturn between 2007 and 2009. In a domestic context, numerous commentators argue that catastrophic events, such as state capture, COVID-19 relief fund exploitation, and the July 2021 looting, all stem from poor risk management practices, flawed organisational culture, inadequate controls, and governance failures. To date, many observers are convinced that ethics and compliance units within organisations failed dismally, thereby allowing deceitful conduct and excessive risk-taking practices (Greenberg, 2010).

The Business Insider (2020) article reported that many construction companies colluded through bid-rigging during preparations for the FIFA World Cup 2010. Consequently, the budget for building the stadiums had to be expanded by R14 billion compared to initial projections. The list of these misconducts never ends. The cases relating to VBS, Bosasa, Sharemax, Sasol, EOH, and Goldfields are all important to consider. As Greenberg (2010) suggests, such risky behaviour in pursuit of short-run benefits by many organisations indicates that some organisational controls failed to deliver what all stakeholders expect. Greenberg further argues that

these adverse business outcomes confirm that compliance and ethics programmes are simply "check-the-box" routines to "fulfill legal requirements specified on paper but do not affect fundamental change in corporate behaviour."

Bonime-Blanc and Brevard, (2009) long proposed that "In an era of cataclysmic repercussions of ethical breaches throughout the world, it is critical for senior management - and, even more so, for boards of directors - to exercise active oversight on issues of business integrity and compliance". It is evident that ethical dilemmas, encompassing personal, occupational, and unrealistic presumptions, can arise anywhere in the world, at any time, and at any level of organisations.

To mitigate the challenges of ethics and corruption, it is necessary for Senior Management Service (SMS) public service members to disclose their interests annually. This is so that heads of departments, such as the Public Service Commission (PSC) and Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA) will be able to detect and manage conflicts of interest at an early stage. It is expected of departments to act against employees who are found to have conflicts of interest (DPSA, 2021). According to the Medium-Term Strategic Framework (SA, 2019), Priority 1 of government is to have a state that is capable, ethical, and developmental. A state characterised by strong leadership is people-centred and exhibits better-quality service delivery. To achieve Priority 1 of government, the public service invested resources in the development and training of public servants on ethics (Malatjie, 2023). Therefore, over and above disclosure requirements, the government has introduced compulsory ethics training for all public sector officials and the NSG provides the training.

The Case for the National School of Government's Ethics Course

Section 195 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa envisages a public service that promotes a high standard of professional ethics. To serve this premise, during the

State of the National Address (SONA) held on the 7th of February 2019, the President of South Africa emphasised the administration's commitment to establishing a government that is characterised by ethical leadership and anti-corruption governance. "In improving the capabilities of public servants, the NSG is introducing a suite of compulsory courses, covering areas like ethics and anti-corruption, senior management and supply chain management, and deployment of managers to the coal face to strengthen service delivery" (Ramaphosa, 2019). This statement clearly indicated a strategic role that the NSG is mandated to execute to re-institutionalise the public service in the country.

Training and development in the public sector is of paramount importance and has been enshrined in the Constitution. However, over the past years, service delivery has been declining due to the unethical and corrupt behaviour of public officials. The NSG has been mandated to provide education, training, and development of public service officials. An example of such a compulsory training programme is the Ethics in the Public Service online course, applicable to all public service officials. The main aim of the training programme is to build an ethical culture among public officials by developing their capacity for personal and professional ethical conduct. The learning outcomes of the course are for participants to reflect on and gain insight into their own values; recognise ethical dilemmas in the workplace; apply values, principles, and standards contained in public prescripts; and uphold and promote professional ethics in the workplace (NSG, 2021).

The online training programme is free of charge, has a duration time of 16 hours, and the students can complete it in their own space and pace. Once all course requirements have been met, participants receive a certificate of completion (NSG, 2021). The success of organisations depends on the knowledge, skills, and commitment of their employees, especially leaders. Training and development are critical to empower leaders to enable them to make decisions and enhance performance, ultimately taking organisations to higher levels.

As a practical step, the former Minister of Public Service and Administration issued a statement in 2020 calling on public servants to register for the Ethics course in order to use time more productively during the lockdown period. The Cabinet approved the course in 2018 and decided that it had to be compulsory for all public servants and that rollout should start on the 1st of April 2020. In this statement, the Minister emphasised that "Ethical conduct and organisational integrity are keys to eradicate fraud and corruption in public service and administration. As the training arm of government, it is therefore imperative that NSG implements a training programme that will equip public officials with the skills and competencies to make ethical decisions, to develop organisational integrity, to prevent fraud and combat corruption in the Public Sector" (Mchunu, 2020). As presented in the course brochure, the NSG envisages that by providing ethics training, it will give effect to the constitutional principle of promoting a high standard of professional ethics in the public service and enable the state to function more efficiently. Therefore, the main purpose of ethics training is to promote and institutionalise a culture of integrity and professional ethics as enshrined in the constitution.

Results and Discussion

As indicated earlier, administrative data from the NSG is used to analyse how participants feel about the course and if they are empowered by the Ethics course. The authors start by looking at participation differentiated according to gender, as indicated in Figure 1.1.

There were more females (66%) who attended the course than males (34%) for the period under investigation. Generally, in the public sector there are more females as compared to males and this is a requirement according to legislation as outlined in the Women Empowerment and Equity Bill where it is stated that there should be a minimum of 50% representation and participation of females in decision

making structures (SA, 2013). Hence there were more females in the course than males.

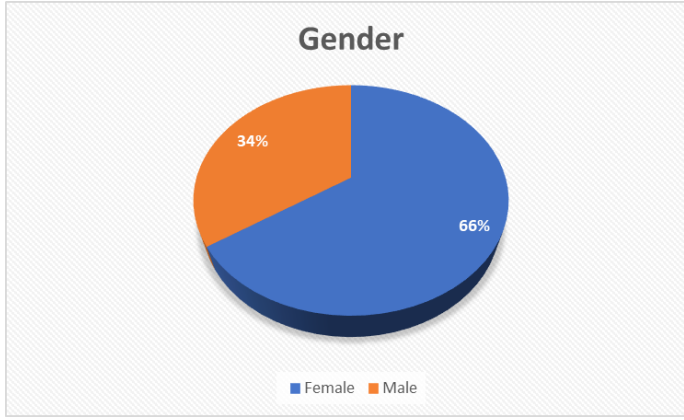

Figure 1.1: Course Attendance Grouped According to Gender

The study by Shonk (2020), however, went further to find that when financial incentives are present, "no matter a person's gender, financial incentives can tempt them to take ethical shortcuts." The contradictory findings indicate that the significant gender gap in ethics training programmes is a discovery warranting further exploration, especially given the male-dominated composition of the executive level in the country's public service sector. Additionally, the DPSA's employment equity mandate stipulates 51% female representation at the SMS and e xecutive levels; nevertheless, this remains a challenge in many departments. It is only found in levels below SMS where the target is consistently met and occasionally exceeded.

Figure 1.2 below illustrates the proportionate attendance of population groups. The programme's participants were predominantly African (87%), followed by Coloured (6%), White (5%), and Indian (2%). These proportions align with the racial distribution in the public sector.

The geographical representation of participants is depicted in Figure 1.3 and the data paints an interesting

picture. Since the course is conducted asynchronously online, a random pattern that corresponds with the size of the civil service across all provinces was assumed. However, as Figure 1.3 below demonstrates, Northwest (14807), GP (5078), and KZN (2524) have the most representatives who attended the course. The representation of attendants from the Free State (1251) and WC (1661) can be seen in the middle range, and the lowest representation from attendants is from Limpopo (1119), MP (999), and NC (468).

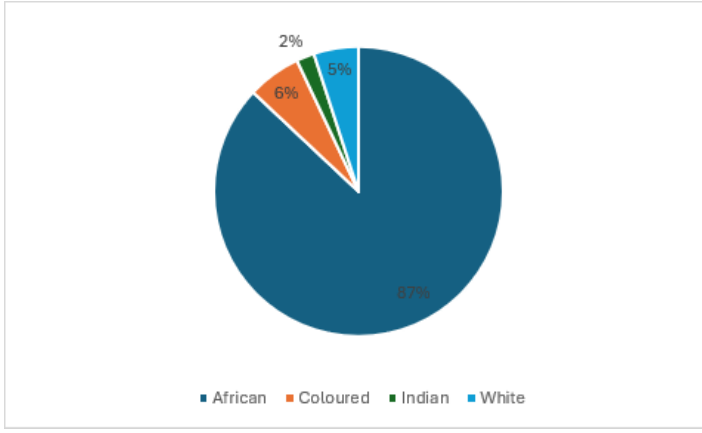

Figure 1.2: Course Attendance Grouped According to Population Group

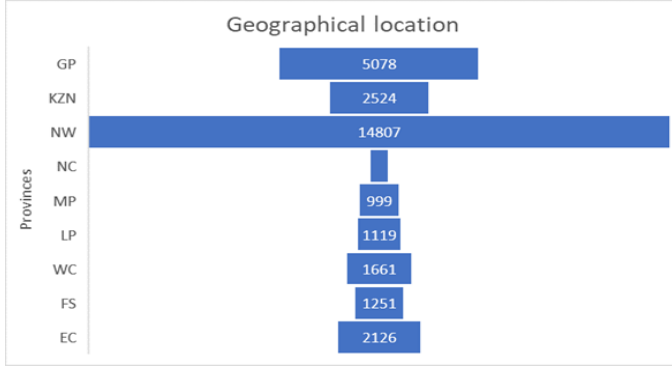

Figure 1.3: Course Attendance Grouped According to Province

The NW province was placed under administration from 2018 until 2021, due to maladministration and corruption (SA, 2021). As such, it was necessary to have employees in the NW attend a course on ethics to improve the understanding of governance. Hence there is a higher number of course attendees from NW than any of the provinces. Out of a total of 64 543 public servants in NW (DPSA, 2022), 14 807 attended the ethics course. . In comparison, the WC shows lower numbers of course attendants. Although the NW had the highest course attendance, the WC, with lower numbers 1661 out of a population of 83625 public servants (DPSA, 2022) , achieved a higher audit status. The 2020/21 overall audit outcome indicates that despite the NW's improvement to an unqualified audit opinion, the audit outcomes relating to financial reporting remained generally stagnant, while the WC attained their outstanding audit status in the year under review (AG, 2021).

The audit report further indicates that NW still has a lot of work to do with regards to governance improvement and mentions that the situation in NW is due to "Lack of strong accountability and effective oversight, resulting in negative impact on service delivery". The WC is performing well as they have proper controls in place with regards to governance, and it is mentioned that this is the case because it facilitates a "Robust control environment, solid and consistent pattern of good financial governance" (AG, 2021). The key service delivery department in the NW is one of the top ten contributors to irregular expenditure, with the Department of Health accounting for R0,14 billion. WC does not appear on the irregular expenditure list (AG, 2021). Hence, it can be inferred that the reasons outlined in the AG report are compelling the NW to have the highest number of course attendees, aiming to enhance their overall understanding of governance and ethics. The analysis further provided information regarding the classification of employment of the participants in the specific departments or spheres of government. This was done to establish which sphere of government mostly embraced the constitutional premise that public servants need to uphold

high ethical and moral standards, as emphasised by the President and Minister in the previous section.

The assumption is that the local government is the governmental sphere struggling with a multitude of ethical dilemmas and the most diverse and complicated service delivery challenges. Figure 1.4 below shows a comparison of course attendance and participation among the three government spheres. The analysis demonstrates that despite the fact that local government faces the greatest challenges in ethical leadership and effective governance, the attendance of the Ethics course was comparatively lower. The low uptake of the course in local government could be attributed to the fact that the NSG mandate was only expanded in 2021 (NSG, 2022) to include the local government sphere, all along NSG was training only in the National and Provincial governments. Moreover, the course was only compulsory to national and provincial government employees as the prescript is not applicable to local government. While the course was not targeted for local government employees, there is a percentage of employees in local government who took interest in the course. The analysis shows that local government had a participation rate of only 12%, compared to the national (34%) and provincial (54%) government figures. Additionally, 50% of the participants were from NW, as discussed earlier.

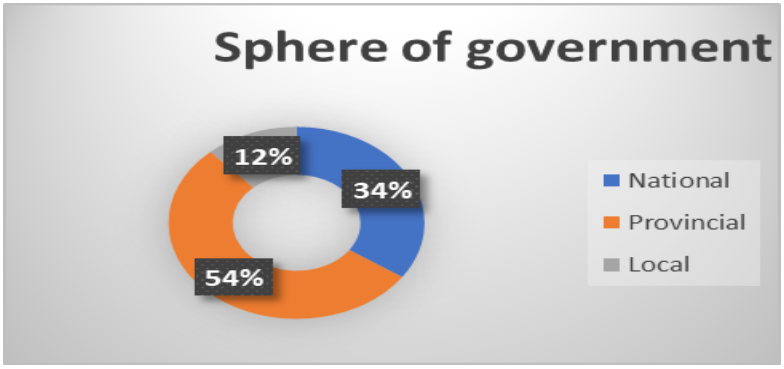

Figure 1.4: Course Attendance Grouped According to Spheres of Government

For emphasis, the former Minister in the Presidency, Khumbudzo Ntshavheni, stated that as of 31 January 2020, only 53% of municipal officials met the minimum competency levels, 52% of municipal CEOs achieved minimum competency levels, and 53.7% of senior managers achieved minimum competency levels (Bussinesstech, 2021:1). Furthermore, within the 2019/20 audit report, only 27 out of 257 municipalities obtained clean audit outcomes, accounting for R5.5 billion in unaccounted spending (Daily Maverick, 2021:1). Moreover, SALGA CEO, Xolile George, revealed that although councillors do not require any qualifications, their ineptitude has become a challenge (SALGA, 2021). Finally, President Ramaphosa (2020) stated that, "We simply cannot afford local government to fail," and the sphere is "too important to our people and their lives, to our developmental objectives and to the very future of this country". Therefore, it is crucial for the NSG to enhance the attendance of local government in this free online course. This objective could be achieved by establishing a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with COGTA, thereby enabling the enforcement of mandatory training requirements.

The analysis of the data regarding the salary levels of the attendants shows that senior managers were least likely to participate in the course. Directors serve in the Senior Management Service (SMS), while also being mainly involved in the day-to-day operations of the populated middle and junior levels of management. Ethical directors serve as mediators in the interrelationship between organisational culture and follower employee outcomes. Directors will lead by example through designing and enforcing ethics policy and procedures; publishing ethics prescripts; and communicating the expected standards of conducting ethics matters in the organisation to all civil servants (including SMS). Figure 1.5 below depicts participation according to different salary levels.

Middle managers, ranging from salary levels 9-12, showed an attendance rate of 21.1%. Their participation is much better than that of SMS members. However, more still needs to be done to improve participation at this level.

Lower-level employees, spanning salary levels 1-8, constitute majority attendance at 76.4%, possibly attributed to their role in receiving and executing instructions from their superiors. As such, there is a higher degree of monitoring participation. Despite the course being mandatory, senior managers still show non-compliance, evident in their low participation rate of 2.4%. Ironically, in numerous reports of misconduct, it is often senior managers who are implicated for unethical behaviour (Dorasamy, 2020; Kekae, 2017; Makamu, 2020).

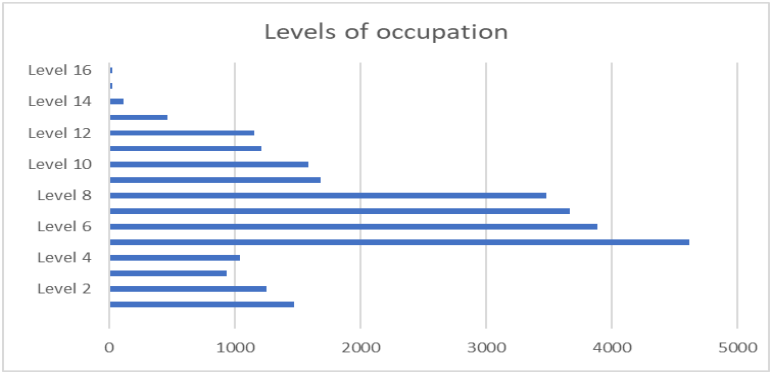

Figure 1.5: Course Attendance Grouped According to Salary Levels

Particularly, leaders project ethical culture through formulating procedures and policies to promote ethics and condemn unethical behaviour. Literature suggests that it is the middle management, deputy directors, and assistant directors (levels 9 to 10), who are in a better position to serve as ethics champions in the public service. Results indicate that out of a total of 9 385 members of senior management only 780 attended the course (8% attendance rate) and from a total of 91 416 lower management services 2500 attended the course (2.7% attendance rate).

The previous section addressed the participants' demographics. The next section will focus on the qualitative aspects of this inquiry, as this will evaluate the impact of the course. To evaluate the course, a compulsory feedback survey

was used. The completion of the survey was a prerequisite for receiving an electronic certificate.

The Feedback Survey

The process of assessment forms a pivotal part of the culture of teaching and learning. The process is generally undertaken using two broad types of assessments: summative and formative. At the conclusion of a module or unit, summative assessments are used to evaluate students' progress; identify whether learning objectives were met; to determine whether they can advance to the next level; and ascertain whether certification requirements are met (OECD, 2008). In contrast, formative assessment entails the iterative and interactive evaluation of learners' accomplishments, aiming to identify learning needs and adjust teaching methods accordingly (OECD, 2008). The latter method surpasses the former by enabling the incorporation of new techniques to enhance responses to diverse learner needs, achieved through adaptable and differentiated teaching. This approach strengthens learner achievement and mitigates discrepancies in student outcomes.

The principles of formative assessment are applicable to, inter alia, academic and policy-making institutions to pinpoint areas of improvement and to advance constructive and effective philosophy throughout the teaching and learning process. Provincial and national governments utilise this tool as a means of meeting long-term goals; to promote lifelong learning; and to access a new set of skills (OECD, 2008). Motivated by both qualitative and quantitative evidence, the government is driven by the understanding that integrating formative assessment into training programmes enhances learner achievement and addresses the diverse learning needs of broader population groups. With this justification, this section examines the formative assessment the NSG used to determine how its Ethics course affected the participants' orientation towards ethics.

The NSG used an anonymous survey to assess the varying perceptions of attendees using specific questions related to the content and facilitation. The purpose of the survey is twofold. Firstly, the survey measures how specific components of the training raise ethical awareness, and the challenges that accompany that awareness. Secondly, to assist the school to evaluate, review, and re-align its training facilitation in a manner that addresses those challenges while strengthening the capacity in the public sector. This brings insight about the underlying factors behind the major failures in service provision in certain areas, and to conduct training to address identified learning needs of public servants. Based on the feedback from public servant employees who completed the course, the subsequent summary statistics were computed.

Q1. The course addressed my learning needs

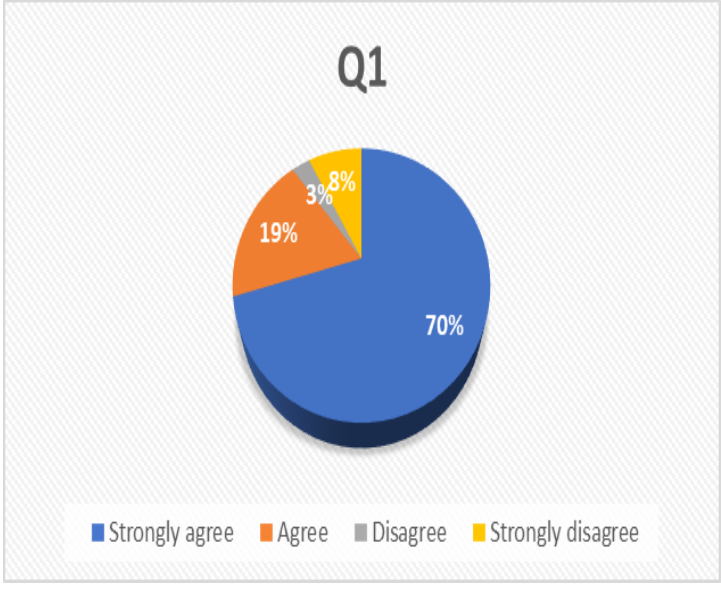

Figure 1.6: Learning Needs

Noessel (2003) argues that learning needs refer to an existing gap between the current knowledge state, enthusiasm, and

skillset of a learner relative to what they expect to achieve from a learning experience. Acknowledging and identifying these needs from the onset serve as an effective model to empower students and instructors early in the learning programme. The insights can be instrumental in customising the training facilitation strategies to enable trainees to reach and exceed learning as well as personal objectives. Figure 1.6 suggests that 90% of the participants were convinced that the course did address their learning needs in terms of ethics matters, with 70% strongly agreeing and 19% agreeing. Whereas 11% (3% and 8%) felt that, the course was insufficient in empowering them to manage ethical dilemmas better. While related to learning needs, the second question asks participants how informative they found the topics covered in the course.

Q2. The course improved my knowledge of the topics that were covered

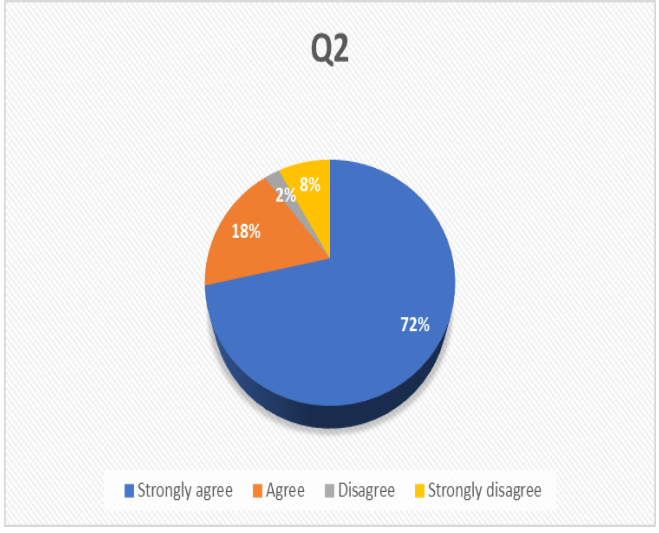

Figure 1.7: Ethics Knowledge

Employees face internal ethical battles with multifaceted consequences, encompassing emotional, moral, and

physiological dimensions. Not all ethics training programmes tap into the weight of these battles. Consequently, many individuals tend to bend laws, rules, and policies, seeking shortcuts to the solutions to these battles. Therefore, when conducted effectively, these programmes must empower workers to become whistle-blowers due to the associated risks to the organisation as well as the individual. When questioned about the improvement in their knowledge of ethics following the course, 72% expressed strong conviction that the course effectively addressed their knowledge gap in ethical challenges, while an additional 18% affirmed this improvement. However, 10% remained unconvinced about being adequately empowered to confront ethical dilemmas as they arise in public service after attending the course. The following two questions assessed the relevance and applicability of the contents of the course to people and their working environment.

Q3. The learning material was applicable to me

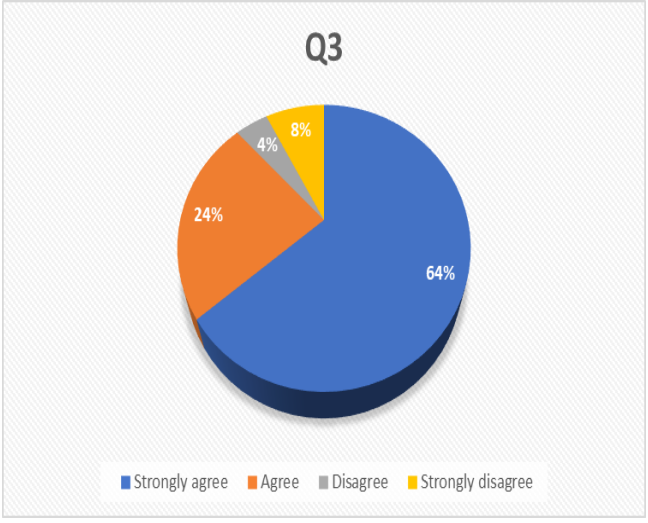

Figure 1.8: The course applicability

In a complex world of consistent ethical dilemmas and ethical transgressions, organisations need to emphasise education on ethics through training to avoid assuming that workers are always fully aware of what is right and wrong in a given situation based on personal standards of conduct. In fact, individuals need more exogenous input, assistance, and considerations to make the most suitable and appropriate decision, particularly at the workplace. Although a total of 12% rejected the applicability of the course to practical workplace situations, a total of 88% (64% and 24%) felt that the course was applicable.

Q4. The learning material was relevant to my working environment

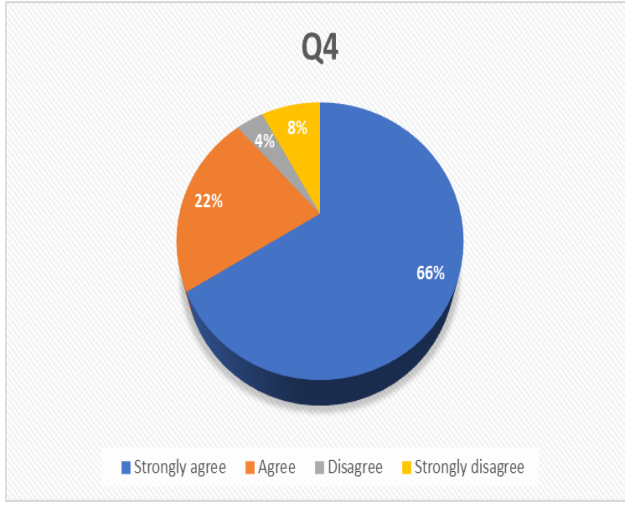

Figure 1.9: The course relevance

In a workplace, ethics compliance is important when considering forming strong and effective teams. This is because it is impossible for employees who disregard ethics to honour the mission of the organisation. These employees live up to unreasonable standards that lead them to behaviour that is misaligned with organisational values. Looking at the graph above, 66% of the people strongly support the relevance

of the learning material to their working environment. Thus, attendees have a stronger belief in that their learning needs were met and that they gained relevant knowledge from the course. The last question assessed the practicality of the learning material.

Q5. The learning material provided me with examples of practical application

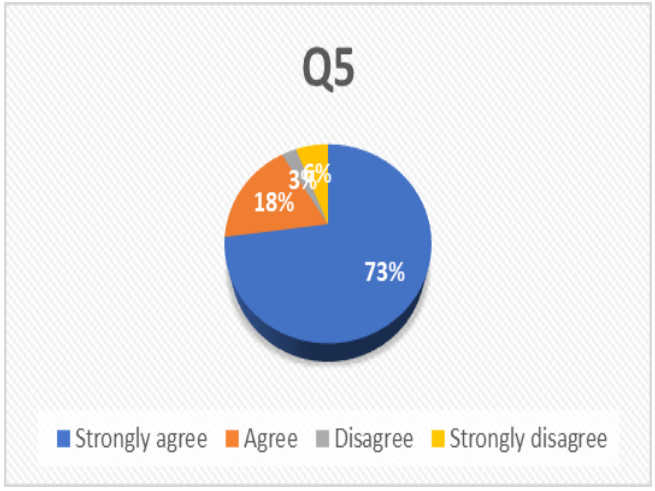

Figure 1.10: The course practicality

Findings in Figure 1.10 conform to the observed pattern that a generally high proportion (73%) of attendees felt that the training provided practical examples of applying ethical principles when confronted with arduous real-life situations. However, 9% of the attendees still maintain a contrasting perspective, asserting that the material lacked practical application.

In summary, across analyses of the answers to the five survey questions, the proportions of the attendees who strongly affirm that the course was necessary, relevant, and impactful to them and the workplace constituted the majority of the responses, ranging between 64% and 73%. However, it is notable that about a tenth of the attendees consistently

rejected the essence and practicality of the course. The reasons for this could be because of various factors, including the content, facilitation of training, or applicability. Due to the limited survey in terms of questions asked, the study was not able to determine the main reasons for this outcome. The proportions strongly in disagreement, as well as those strongly in agreement, consistently exceeded the proportions merely in disagreement or agreement, respectively. This suggests that respondents exhibited greater clarity and distinctiveness in their responses. Nonetheless, the average score recorded (from 1 = Strongly agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Disagree, 4 = Strongly disagree) was 1.5, 1.5, 1.6, 1.5, and 1.5 for Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4, and Q5, respectively. The NSG interprets this as a generally positive perception of the course and the training provided.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Values, morals, and ethics have strong impacts on daily judgement and human behaviour. Educational and developmental programmes that tap into these concepts are designed to produce positive outcomes, particularly in leadership and organisational culture in general. This is true in the corporate world as well as the public sector. The study and the subsequent analysis present the following recommendations:

- Gender disparities and regional biases in ethics are deemed unacceptable, particularly since financial incentives like bribery transcend gender and occur everywhere. Consequently, enhancing the participation of learners across all provinces should be pursued by establishing Memorandums of Agreement (MOAs) with the office of the Premier in each respective province.
- Through the expanded mandate, the NSG needs to prioritise the local government sphere when providing high-impact training in various developmental areas. Negotiating Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) with departments responsible for local government and/or

municipalities to ensure improved participation of learners from the local government sphere should be prioritised.

- The NSG feedback questionnaire is routine and too limited for effective inference of data. As such, the last three questions should be reconsidered, as all of them are basically asking the same thing. Additional demographic characteristics (e.g. age, number of years in the public sector) should be added to the questionnaire and the survey should be kept anonymous.
- The NSG should consistently enhance its strategic partnerships with other departments and the corporate sector. This will expand the range of courses offered, including ethics, and simultaneously amplify the impact on empowering public servants.
- If ethics transgression is a global issue and the private sector equally struggles with the same problem, why not contemplate extending this course to private sector officials as well? Given that this is a free and compulsory course intended to have a broader impact, such inclusion could contribute to marketing the training facility and the course itself. The government serves not only the public sector, and ethical challenges pose a significant risk to the entire country.
- Participation in the course by SMS members needs to be improved and this could be done by including the course as part of their performance agreements to be monitored by human resources (HR).
- The mandatory disclosure of financial interests through DPSA should apply to all public servants rather than being restricted solely to managers, as it currently stands. The issue of ethics extends across all salary levels, necessitating comprehensive compliance.

With the mandate to promote good governance, the Auditor General of South Africa persistently raises concerns about corruption and unethical conduct in the public sector (AGSA, 2022). This is despite the government having launched multiple programmes and initiatives (Economic Reconstruction and Recovery Plan; professionalisation of the

public sector, including ethics training) to curb corruption. Literature (Manyaka & Sebola, 2013; Sebola, 2018; Sihver, 2011) highlights the importance of ethics training as a cornerstone for anti-corruption in the public sector. It is worth noting that the NSG compulsory Ethics training was only introduced two years ago, and it might be too early to see the impact of the training.

Therefore, to answer the research question of whether ethics can be taught? The answer is yes. It should be noted that for government to fight the scourge of corruption in an effective manner, there is a need not only for ethical training but for continued evaluation of the training programme to assess the impact. Ethics training should not be a one-time occurrence; rather, it should be an ongoing process to continually reinforce the awareness and commitment of public servants to uphold the fundamental values and principles enshrined in the constitution, ensuring a steadfast adherence to the highest standards of professional ethics. Meanwhile, ethics training should not only be specific to the public sector, but it also needs to cut across all sectors. T hus ethics should be included in the curriculum of university education as well. Ethics should be a way of life for all individuals within the country, and it is imperative to instil this value from an early stage.

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