Education for Ethics and Human Resource Management
A Necessary Synergy

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Abstract

Many public administration ethicists argue that a single standalone course in ethics should be a part of every M.P.A. curriculum, but some programs may prefer to incorporate ethics into several courses. This article suggests that a series of courses would be a promising alternative to a standalone ethics course. It would begin in the M.P.A. introductory course by setting a foundation for the study of ethics and then relate ethics to human resource management (HRM) in a sequence of required and elective HRM courses. The long and evolutionary relationship between ethics and HRM can provide a strong basis for ethics education with two purposes in mind: first, to show the generalist public administration student the ethical issues involved in managing personnel systems, and second, to acquaint students interested in careers in HRM to be ethically aware in situations they are likely to face in their careers. The literature in HRM and ethics is reviewed to develop a conceptual linkage between the two topics. The article concludes by showing how the two have been integrated in a three-course sequence in a NASPAA-accredited M.P.A. program.

Public personnel administration, or, in the more current terminology, human resource capital, has been central to the field of public administration (PA) since passage of the Pendleton Act in 1887. An argument can be made that the moralistic tone of early public administration contained a strong but implicit set of ethical beliefs, based largely on the elimination of partisan political corruption, that helped guide early personnel management. Growing interest in the systematic study of ethics in PA in the 1970s and 1980s underscored the relationship between HRM and ethics (Caiden 1971; Plant 1983; Plant and Gortner 1981). It seemed then that ethics and personnel might develop a close relationship, based on both the likelihood that new ethics management duties would fall largely on personnel units and the movement
within the personnel field away from a fascination with method and technique to normative issues, such as managing a diverse workforce, public service values, and sexual harassment, all of which were topics included in a 1983 personnel text that included a chapter on ethics (Hays and Kearney 1983). The ideal seemed to be a synergy between ethics and HRM that saw ethics as a consideration in the hiring process, education and training, the monitoring and enforcement of standards and values, and the application of penalties for noncompliance. Human resource professionals would work closely with organizational leaders to teach and model behaviors and actions that demonstrated adherence to ethical as well as legal standards of conduct.

Has the relationship between ethics and HRM grown and matured over the past twenty-five years? Are M.P.A. programs preparing students for the ethical challenges faced by HR professionals, and for the role expected of them in helping organizations and individuals to realize high ethical standards? What sorts of ethical issues related to HR are most salient for public servants working in non-HR positions? What curricular and pedagogical strategies seem to have the most potential to bridge HRM and ethics? These are the issues explored in this article.

**Link Between Human Resource Management and Ethics**

For over a century, the most pressing issues in HRM have been the efficient and effective management of a complex civil service system, the relationship of personnel specialists and units with line managers, and the impact of personnel systems on individuals. The predominant orientation through much of this period was technical and legal, although early scholars such as Leonard White (1935 <not in References>) pointed out that civil servants should develop a doctrine of loyalty to career service that, as a reviewer of White’s textbook noted, “does not involve personal or administrative subservience. . . . The ablest administrator will be the one who gives to his political chief his own opinion unbiased by what he may think to be the political predilections or prejudices of the cabinet officer” (Bradley 1935, 1336). To use an apt phrase, there was no room in White’s public service for the “morally mute” administrator (Bird and Waters 1989). To produce the ethical administrator, White suggested, rigorous training and an extended probationary period in the range of five years should be the central focus of the personnel office, but he left open the extent to which training in ethics or values would balance the largely technical orientation of contemporary PA.

By the early post–World War II era, however, the technical side of personnel administration was clearly dominant. Specialists were the stewards of merit systems using large public organizations as the primary locus of public sector work. The major textbook of the era, *Public Personnel Administration* by William E. Mosher, J. Donald Kingsley, and O. Glenn Stahl, originally published in 1936<not in References>, focused largely on the techniques and tasks of personnel units and the need
to apply scientific methods to the study and practice of personnel administration. Reviewing the third edition of the book in 1951, Wallace Sayre remarked that “this preoccupation with techniques also renders superficial, even artificial, the authors’ efforts to emphasize the factors of motivation, morale, and other ‘human relations’ aspects of administration; especially is this inhibition revealed in the narrow conceptual range of the chapter on training” (Sayre 1951, 182). Personnel administration seemed to be moving away from the normative vision of White to a preoccupation with specialization, technique, and the development of the field as a specialty and function at arm’s length from a concern with the goals of the larger organization. Sayre found this particularly troubling in that the Mosher, Kingsley, and Stahl book was the only comprehensive text available. However, the 1956 edition (which no longer had Kingsley as a co-author) included for the first time a chapter on public service ethics, an indication of the gradual move in HRM writing and practice to embrace ethical concerns.

While a major change from the limited technical vision of the 1940s and 1950s, the new public personnel administration envisioned by Felix Nigro (1961), Frederick Mosher (1968), Wallace Sayre (1950), and others in the 1960s did not include an explicit recognition of the need to incorporate training in ethics. Rather, the focus was on moving the orientation of the field away from a static and narrow concern with technical tasks to a broader sense of the role that human resources play in public management and policy. The redefinition of the field as a dynamic, research-oriented staff function closely tied to agency purpose provided a basis for new issues and tasks to be added to the base set by those who saw it as only a means of administering merit systems.

The decades of the 1960s and 1970s witnessed just how prescient the predictions of dynamic change in personnel administration had been. The continued rapid expansion of the role of the administrative state was certainly one major element of change. Unionization and expanded demands for a more diverse and representative workforce, as the civil rights and women’s rights movements affected personnel, changed the character of the workforce and added levels of conflict for personnel administrators. As Frederick Mosher (1968) noted, professionalization of the workforce was already well underway and likely to continue into the future. The basic notion of the political neutrality of civil servants was challenged by the Nixon administration, leading to concerns about a repoliticization of federal public service. The growing significance of economics-based notions of motivation, performance, merit, and incentives led to the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978, with the explicit message that self-interest as much as a concern for public service motivated public employees and should serve as a means for managers and personnelists to manipulate incentive systems.

Pulled in several new directions at once, public personnel administration, by the early 1980s, bore increasingly less resemblance to the field envisioned by William Mosher and others. Although a foundation from the early period remained, concerned with the work of the personnel office in managing a civil service system, new topical areas had emerged, some reflective of a closer connection to political issues, others based more on the changing nature of the workforce. Indicative of the growing connection between ethics and HRM was a special issue of Public Personnel Management in 1981 edited by James Bowman and entirely devoted to the growing interest in the ethics-HRM nexus.
The connection of ethics and HRM was also a theme in a popular anthology of the period, *Public Personnel Administration: Problems and Prospects*, edited by Steven Hays and Richard Kearney (1983). The choice of topics illustrated the expanded notion of public personnel administration. The traditional emphasis on techniques formed only one of the four parts of the book, five of the twenty-one chapters. Instead, the remaining chapters dealt with the environment of public personnel administration, personnel policies and issues, and merit system reform. Topics such as constitutional literacy, diversity and professionalization, sexual harassment, and affirmative action showed the broadening of the duties of personnel offices and the range of issues thought relevant in educating personnel specialists.

One topic assigned a chapter in the Hays and Kearney text was ethics (Plant 1983). Recognizing the relative novelty of including ethics as an element of public personnel administration, Jeremy Plant noted that “the merit system that forms the core of the American system of personnel administration was created in part for its ethical underpinnings; indeed, ‘merit’ implies not only the possession of skills useful in public service jobs, but integrity and freedom from political corruption” (290). However, this somewhat understated and implicit view of ethics in personnel administration had to change to a more direct and explicit one for two compelling reasons. First, civil service reform legislation was creating new demands on personnel offices to become directly involved in ethics management. Second, the bureaucrat-bashing of the Nixon administration and its subsequent fall from grace for legal and ethical lapses had created in the public eye a greater concern for ethics. Regaining citizen trust required greater attention to programs designed to produce both real and perceived improvements in ethics.

Plant envisioned a growth of activity in public sector ethics centered around a redefinition of the role of the personnel office, through training, promulgation of codes of ethics, and the harnessing (and perhaps taming) of professional ethics, with an eye also to the need to continue to cultivate the line-staff partnership between personnel specialists and managers “operating in conditions of ethical stress” (Plant 1983, 302). The focus of personnel administration was on the individual and the need to assist in developing ethical awareness.

**Ethics Education and Human Resource Management**

As public personnel administration was pulled in new and sometimes conflicting directions by outside forces in the 1970s, the field of public administration ethics was expanding as an area of interest among younger scholars (Cooper 2001). Ethics education moved into the PA classroom as well. In the 1970s and 1980s, courses in ethics began to appear in a number of M.P.A. programs, but little agreement existed as to the best approach to use (Yoder and Denhardt 2001). The adoption of Standard 3.21 by the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) in 1989 “largely settled the question of whether ethics should be taught in graduate public administration/affairs”
Despite the stimulus that the incorporation of the new standard provided for MPA programs (Menzel 1997), many ethicists in the field considered it a weak standard, since it did not require the addition of a core course in ethics. Programs were permitted to show how the standard could be met through a discussion of ethics throughout the curriculum, with little ability of the NASPAA Commission on Peer Review and Accreditation (COPRA) or site visitors to judge the quality and coverage of the instruction provided.

Four Stimuli for Public Administration Ethics

The 1990s was the breakthrough decade for research and writing on ethics education in public administration. Four developments were especially important in stimulating interest in ethics education in the 1990s. One was the attention given to ethics in the literature, epitomized by the publication of *The Handbook of Administrative Ethics* edited by Terry Cooper (1994). Ethics education was considered one of the areas of inquiry, and chapters were devoted to ethics education and to ethics training. Notably, Catron and Denhardt (1994) looked at the coverage of ethics education in M.P.A. programs by examining NASPAA self-study reports. While more programs were offering ethics within the curriculum, they noted that fewer than half were doing so in what they considered an informed manner.

A second initiative that stimulated thinking about ethics education was the series of conferences on ethics that began with a conference titled “Ethics in Government: An Intricate Web” held in Washington, D.C., in 1989. This was followed in 1991 by a “Conference on the Study of Government Ethics” in Park City, Utah, and the “National Symposium on Ethics and Values in the Public Administration Academy” in Tampa in 1995. While the first two conferences focused heavily on the role of ethics in public administration scholarship and research, the Tampa conference looked broadly at issues of ethics education as well as research and scholarship in the field. The Park City conference was a stimulus to produce the first comprehensive multi-authored book on ethics (Frederickson 1993) and also framed discussions that led to the development of the Cooper *Handbook*. The Tampa conference produced papers on ethics education that were the basis of a multi-authored volume on ethics education that appeared in 1998. Edited by James Bowman and Donald Menzel (1998), *Teaching Ethics and Values in Public Administration Programs: Innovations, Strategies and Issues* was the first book-length treatment of ethics education. Its seventeen chapters were organized into four parts: program innovations, teaching strategies inside the academy, teaching strategies outside the academy, and ethical issues affecting programs, students, and faculty.

A third development in the 1990s was the sponsorship by NASPAA of the *Journal of Public Administration Education*. First appearing in 1994, *J-PAE* was initially a joint project of the University of Akron and the University of Kansas, then was sponsored by the Section on Public Administration Education of ASPA. In 1997 NASPAA finalized its sponsorship of the journal, which quickly became a major forum for discussion of issues in ethics education and related topics, such as social equity and diversity. *J-PAE* provided educators with a journal that over the years devoted a good deal of attention to ethics education (Hart 1999; Hejka-Ekins 1998; Jurkiewicz and Nichols 2002; Menzel 1998a, 1998b; Pickus and Dostert 2002; Rizzo 1998).
A fourth development was coming from another set of scholars and educators dealing with identical personnel issues but bearing a more popular name—human resource management—in the private as well as the public sector. They have focused on the critical importance of ethical issues in human resource management as well as in personnel management (Payne and Wayland 1999; Werhane, Radin, and Bowie 2004; and have found that emphasizing the role of ethics in HRM is positively correlated to increased employee commitment (Long 2007; Senge 2006;), trust (Cropanzano, Bowen, and Gilliland 2007; Werhane 1999), higher employee compliance and support (Tyler, Dienhart, and Thomas 2008), enhanced knowledge creation (Currie and Kerrin 2003; Sung-Choon, Morris, and Snell 2007), organizational decision quality (Verbos et al. 2007), organizational strategic competitive advantage (Becker, Huselid, and Ulrich 2001), and organizational effectiveness (Pfeffer 1998, 2007).

Although most researchers and practitioners tend to agree that personnel administrators and human resource professionals play a critically important role as ethics advocates, the scope of that role and the ethical values to be incorporated have been a source of debate (Legge 2000; Palmer 2007). For example, Schumann (2001) has argued that human resource management must be guided by universal moral principles, rather than by ethical relativism. Schultz and Brender-Ilan (2004) have also suggested that the duties human resource professionals conduct need to be evaluated based upon broader moral and ethical philosophies, rather than a traditional justice-based ethical framework.

The debate on the scope and ethical values that a HR professional should uphold has had a strong impact on the ethics teaching philosophy and approach in HRM courses at schools. The effort to integrate ethics into HR-related courses at schools has somehow been ignored by academics, and teachers of HRM courses have to muddle through various tactics to incorporate ethical components in their courses (Bowman and Menzel 1998; Greenberg 1987; Wells and Schminke 2001). This insufficiency in the academic attention becomes apparent when the question of how ethics is taught in HRM courses is examined.

Teaching Ethics in HRM Courses

It could be observed that two major issues remain unsolved regarding teaching ethics in HRM courses. The first issue is that ethics training in HRM courses has been developed on an ad hoc basis, rather than drawn from any systematically considered ethical theory or embedded within any pragmatic, workable education program, leading to significant variation in the methods used to tackle the common problem. This has caused concerns both to educators and practitioners. As Latham (1989) indicated, teaching design must be guided by theory; thus, ethics components in HRM courses should be based on solid theoretical frameworks that integrate the ethics and HRM literatures. Arguably the link is still missing. Some educators feel that systematic guidance or standardization in the form of guidelines, best practices, textbooks, and suggested/classic cases on how ethics should be incorporated in HRM courses is needed to address the ad hoc treatment of ethics.

The second issue is the purpose of ethics education. Is it for guidance on law, or is it for the improvement of ethical sensitivity? For some, teaching ethics in HRM
courses has a purely functional purpose, reflecting the belief that an MPA student should know the legal boundaries of ethics issues and be able to conduct human resources practice within these bounds. When the authors asked for feedback on how ethics is taught in HRM courses in a professional listserv, quite a few responses from current educators focused on the teaching of legal issues related to HR practices, such as civil rights laws, affirmative action, and Title VII. However, for others the major challenge is to improve the ethical sensitivity of students who will perform HRM functions. For those holding this view, the goal should be to create HR professionals who can think for themselves about ethical issues that are not or cannot be specified by legal constraints. While the legal system inherently reflects societal ethical values, it is insufficient to equate ethics education solely to an understanding of legal constraints.

The difficulty is heightened by M.P.A. students who feel it is relatively easier and more objective if HR practices are prescribed and rendered as legal constraints, established procedures, and instructions, rather than personal subjective interpretations of observed events against abstract moral principles. In their view, the latter approach is easily prone to bias, mistakes, and personal preferences.

Is it possible to synergize these different perspectives and practices of teaching ethics in personnel management courses? The HRM textbooks in the public and nonprofit management domains generally have some discussions on ethical issues related to various aspects of human resource functionalities, but very rarely have a specific section or chapter on ethics, with little attention devoted to an attempt to cultivate the ethics development of future HR professionals (Berman et al. 2006; Cayer 1980; Farazmand 2007; Klingner and Nalbandian 2003; Pynes 1997; Riccucci and Naff 2008). A sidebar or a textbox is generally used to introduce ethics questions when discussing each major HR function, and sometimes one or two integrative cases are provided as an appendix to enlighten the ethics issues. Generally, ethical materials are segmented into specific areas of HR functions, especially in areas that have been focal points of impropriety in the past and are, by necessity, foundations to move forward. For example, in the area of performance appraisals, most textbooks focus on ethical concerns regarding the appropriateness of MBO appraisal systems, because of the perceived difficulty of ascertaining clear-cut quantifiable goals and the certainly unethical practice of holding employees accountable for actions unattainable (Cayer 1980; Klingner and Nalbandian 2003; Riccucci and Naff 2008). Legitimate concerns regarding the establishment of accurate performance criteria are generally raised that point directly to the aspects of not requiring or sustaining accurate documentation for employees and supervisors (Pynes 1997).

In the area of compensation, equity theory seems to be the theoretical foundation for ethical concerns, and thus is the focus of most textbooks. Some texts question changes in compensation schedules that place all employees on a scale with the same structure (Cayer 1980), but they provide different solutions to this ethical dilemma. An option to the scaled program is to use a pay-for-performance system, even though Cayer (1980) and Klingner and Nalbandian (2003) feel that objective goals are at times unattainable. Riccucci and Naff (2008) suggest that this type of compensation can be used if tied to the performance evaluation and assuming the evaluation is done subjectively< objectively?>. In the area of training and development, Berman et al. (2006) propose some useful guidelines that are similar to Kohlberg’s (1981, 1984). They suggest a three-level acculturation during training.
and development. Level 1 is the base level that addresses ethical issues, using fear, threats, and punishment. In Level 2, the employee makes an effort to conform and comply with the mandated process and standards. Attainment to Level 3 indicates that a well-developed understanding and reasoning relating to ethical processes and practices has been achieved. Pynes (1997) addresses the concern of training and development in a dynamic environment and the need for exposure to up-to-date information as a basis for decision-making. In the area of equal opportunity and diversity, all textbooks discuss how the civil rights acts of 1866, 1871, and 1964 and Title VII did not satisfactorily address the conflict with diverse employees because of the required continuation of legislation to address ethical violations of conduct related to diversity.

Without suggesting that textbooks necessarily play a dominant role in actual teaching practices, it can be said that these textbooks reflect the current thinking on what and how ethics should be taught in HRM courses. This brief sample of the ethical issues discussed by the major texts conveys an impression of the importance of ethics as a core value in all HRM functions. It points to a definite answer to the questions of why ethics education should be discussed in the context of HRM and what should be included in an HRM ethics program. These textbooks also provide some useful teaching tactics regarding ethics training, since educators realize that simply reading about ethics, ethical decision-making, or ethical dilemmas does not have lasting effects, and training needs to go beyond simply teaching “rules,” since rules cannot cover the vast array of ethical dilemmas faced. Based on this observation, a few effective teaching strategies are suggested by these texts, such as norming, case studies, behavior modeling, games, and interactive videos.

Norming is a pragmatic method in which, instead of formal classroom ethics training, the “ethos” of the organization is instilled into students by a process of socialization. With this method, ethics understanding is acquired by observing, not by teaching; the sheer force of the institution, via its traditions and the example of its senior professionals, shapes new employees in the desired directions through unseen but nonetheless powerful socialization processes. A weaker version of norming is to integrate ethics into various HRM topics. With this method, ethics need not be taught as a separate subject, since it appears within the other aspects of teaching. Students will naturally follow the code of ethics in the institutionalization process when they are introduced to live examples of the organization’s primary values and ethical rules.

Case studies are probably the pedagogical method most preferred by all texts because they give abstract theories practical relevance and show the wide-ranging implications of a set of management ethical issues. A large proportion of the cases for ethics discussions are drawn from court cases under Title VII litigation. These cases are generally presented as ethical dilemmas or integrity issues. In an ethical dilemma situation, an HR specialist is faced with a number of options, often none of them sounding good, and the difficulty arises out of the fact that it is not obvious which of these options is the ethically appropriate one to follow. In the integrity situation, the ethically appropriate option is known, but there is considerable pressure on to choose the ethnically inappropriate option. Discussions of such cases are usually very effective; students are especially likely to engage in the discussion on the ones that arouse cognitive conflict in them.

Behavior modeling, role-playing, and games and interactive videos are sometimes
used by instructors as well. In these activities, students either act out a situation where there are ethical dilemmas and then copy the sense-making process and the appropriate behavior, or they watch videos portraying an ethical dilemma, such as PBS’s Enterprise and Ethics in America series (19??) or SHRM (Strategic Human Resource Management) Foundation videos. These techniques are considered quite effective in training ethics-related knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors.

This review of current practices of ethics education in HRM pedagogy indicates that the relationship between ethics and personnel management has matured over the past twenty-five years but still reflects an incomplete integration of the two topics. Although the respective literatures of the two fields make note of the relationship and synergy between them, and significant indicators of topics of common concern can be discovered in current practices, pedagogy in HRM requires a foundation in public ethics built upon either a standalone ethics course or significant attention to ethics in an introductory core course. Without careful attention to how ethics is presented prior to its incorporation into specialized courses, the treatment of ethics in functional courses may be sporadic, superficial, and unsystematic. With this assumption in mind, a case example follows of the effort of the M.P.A. program at Pennsylvania State University at Harrisburg to integrate ethics into a three-course sequence of courses, beginning with the introductory core class in the M.P.A. program, moving through the required core class in HRM, and culminating in an advanced elective course dealing with issues in HRM.

A Three-Course Sequence in Ethics

For a variety of reasons, the MPA program at Penn State Harrisburg has never offered a standalone course in public sector or administrative ethics. There are several reasons for this neglect, including at least these five:

- Lack of familiarity of core MPA faculty with the field of public sector ethics. Only one core faculty member over the thirty-plus years the program has been in existence has had significant expertise in the topic.
- A practitioner or managerial orientation that stresses traditional techniques, such as budgeting, human resource management, program planning, and level-of-government courses.
- Belief in the approach that integrates ethics throughout the curriculum (although no systematic approach, such as the ethics matrix, has been used to ensure this is happening).
- Severe resource constraints that limit the ability to add new courses to the curriculum and ensure there is faculty capacity to teach them.
- A desire to keep a balance between the core requirements (currently six courses in a thirty-six to forty-five credit program) and electives, and to keep the core relatively constant over time.

Under these conditions, ethics was relegated to a minor topic in the program, covered primarily in a two-week unit in the foundation course. In recent years, however, the program has been profoundly affected by personnel changes, with only three of the eight core faculty in 2000 still on the core of the program in 2008.
One of the three is the lead instructor for PADM 500, the program’s introductory course, and also serves as MPA coordinator. This has led to a situation that allows for a fundamental rethinking of the role of ethics in the curriculum. For at least the foreseeable future, the goal is to create a sequence of three courses in the MPA, two core classes and one popular elective, that will provide students with an introduction to major approaches to public sector ethics and relate them to human resource issues. If additional faculty resources are available, it is likely that a standalone ethics course will be added to the curriculum, but the linkage between ethics as a cornerstone of the general discipline and ethical issues as a fundamental aspect of contemporary human resource management is offered here as an alternative to the preference for a single, general ethics course. A description of the current three-course sequence follows.

**PADM 500**

PADM 500 is the foundation course as well as a prerequisite course for Ph.D. students in public administration who lack recent coursework in the field. It is also a popular elective course for graduate students in cognate disciplines, especially from programs in business, environmental engineering, and the behavioral sciences and education. Enrollment is typically in the range of twenty-five students per section, the usual cutoff for classes. A senior professor teaches the class, with occasional overflow sections assigned to adjunct professors. The lead instructor’s major academic interest is in public ethics, but the comprehensiveness of the course prevented him from allowing more than three of the fifteen course sessions to be devoted to ethics.

The objectives of the course are:

- Identify major concepts, theories, and issues that have guided the development of PA.
- Develop a working vocabulary of the field.
- Become familiar with methods of analysis to guide informed decisions.
- Appreciate the multiple perspectives, values, and ethical challenges in the work of PA.
- Understand contemporary issues that continue to change the field, and be prepared for future challenges.

Through the spring semester of 2008 the course was organized around a set of topics that mirrored the usual fifteen-chapter general public administration text supplemented by some additional assigned articles and books. This approach had two serious limitations. First, it created a good deal of redundancy between topical coverage in PADM 500 and other required courses. Second, it relied heavily on topical coverage in the textbook rather than introduce students to the academic literature in the field. These limitations led to a fundamental reorganization of the course for the Fall 2008 semester. By eliminating material covered in other core courses, it was possible to reconfigure the course in such a way that ethics is introduced early on as a theme to be carried throughout the semester.

Ethics is now addressed in the course in three ways. First, it is introduced in the
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first two course sessions as a fundamental topic in contemporary public administration and as a constant theme in the history of PA as it has struggled to rid governance of corruption and other ethical shortcomings. Second, it is identified as part of a positive approach of individual public servants at all levels to meet the expectations of public administration in a constitutional democracy. Third, it is looked at as a continuing driver of change in the field that requires both ethical awareness on the part of the individual public servant and attention on the part of leaders, specialized ethics program administrators. Ethics coverage is provided using journal articles and one assigned book, Ethics Management for Public Administrators: Building Organizations of Integrity, by Donald C. Menzel (2007).

PADM 505

The second course in this series, PADM 505, “Human Resources in the Public and Nonprofit Sectors,” is one of the core courses for MPA students and a popular elective for students from other, related disciplines. A junior faculty member who has expertise in organizational behavior and HRM teaches it. This course provides a comprehensive overview of public personnel administration, including the development of modern personnel systems in the public sector and contemporary trends and practice in the federal, state, and local governments. Topics in the course highlight critical HR issues, such as recruitment, selection, appraisal, compensation, training, promotions, downsizing, and unionization and collective bargaining. The textbook used is Berman, Bowman, West, and Van Wart, Human Resource Management in Public Service: Paradoxes, Processes, and Problems (2007). In addition to the textbook, journal articles, government documents, and a large number of cases are usually assigned to facilitate student understanding of each topic.

Ethics is emphasized as the major thread linking all functional areas of HR activities in this course. The instructor generally lays a foundation setting forth the ethical complexity of dealing with human resources in the first introductory session, bridging students with what they have learned in PADM 500 regarding ethical issues in public administration. The following two sessions are focused on codes of ethics and legal structures regarding personnel management, emphasizing formal/legalistic perspectives in HRM. Starting from the fourth class session, each functional area of HRM is introduced.

Through these sessions, social equity and responsiveness as well as utilitarianism are slowly infused into class materials and assignments, with the goal of developing students’ ethical awareness beyond legal binding. The last few sessions are generally devoted to employee-friendly policies, unions and government, and HRM and productivity. In these sessions, an integrative perspective of ethics issues is cultivated, with students asked to reflect on the interactions between their personal conscience, universalistic principles, societal norms, contingency/utilitarian factors, and legal constraints when conducting HRM-related functions. An awareness of moral complexity can be generally observed through discussions of cases in which students challenge each other on controversial issues, raising more contingency factors when sense-making HRM practices exemplified in the cases, and providing more thoughtful responses to address issues related to personnel management.

In teaching this course, the instructor relies heavily on cases. The in-class and on-line discussions, assignments, and course projects are based on case methodology,
which students find to be very effective in bringing a wide variety of situations into the class so that they are exposed to HR practices beyond the texts. The instructor selects cases in which students can actively engage with the underpinning ethical dilemmas but find it hard to propose “correct” solutions. The discussion of cases is focused on articulating ethical arguments for different actions in a workplace scenario so that students can reflect on various perspectives and the ethical reasoning behind them. Occasionally, norming techniques are used.

Since most MPA students are full-time professionals, they have had prior experiences, especially prior negative experiences, in various HR-related activities, and are encouraged to share with the class. This creates a norming environment on the reality of ethical practices in current organizations, so that students learn from each other’s “lessons.” This technique has been quite effective, increasing student attention and receptivity to ethics. Although it is hard to make a final judgment as to whether these activities make students more ethical, the students comment in their end-of-course evaluations that this approach increased their ethical consciousness and commitment.

**PADM 512**

The third course that addresses ethics is PADM 512, “Issues in Human Resources.” This course builds on the foundations laid in 500 and 505 by addressing current topics in HR. As an issues course, its content can vary from one term to another based on the choices of the instructor. The example provided here is from the summer of 2008 and describes the changes instituted by an instructor teaching the course for the first time. This individual was also assigned as the lead instructor in PADM 500, so it was possible for him to select topics and readings that bridge HR and ethics.

PADM 512 is unusual in that it is the only class in the Penn State MPA curriculum that is taught only in a six-week summer session. It serves a certificate in human resources program as well as the MPA, and often draws students from other graduate programs in the university as well as occasional doctoral students in the Ph.D. in public administration program and the D.Ed. program in adult education. The class is roughly divided between individuals working in or preparing for careers in HRM and those choosing more general managerial career options. The goals of the course are to develop a greater awareness of the drivers of change affecting the HR field, and to provide a means for HR specialists and public administration generalists to appreciate ways in which the connection between HR and ethics can inform training, management, and policy development in public administration.

The topics selected for summer 2008 included:

- Identifying and stimulating a public service mindset.
- Creating and managing a diverse workforce.
- Dealing with generational change and workforce/succession planning.
- Dealing with issues of harassment, incivility, and ethics in the workplace.

In each of these issues, differing perspectives were identified: that of the em-
employee, the manager, the HR professional, and the public. Differences in situation were also considered: different levels of government, larger and smaller organizations, nonprofit and private sector organizations. The class enrolled twenty-seven students, two above the stated closing size of twenty-five for all MPA classes at Penn State. Most were advanced students in the MPA program, with a few enrolled in cognate programs and two in the Ph.D. in public administration. The class met twice a week, for three hours and fifteen minutes, over six weeks in the late spring and early summer.

In designing the course, the instructor was guided in large measure by the observations of Pickus and Dostert that “challenges facing public policy formation today require a much greater and more fundamental emphasis on collaboration and context in the practice of ethical reflection than is typically encouraged in prevailing pedagogies” (2002, 10). This helped inform both the pedagogical methods chosen and the type of reading assignments used, to meet the standard that “non-ethics courses find ways to encourage students to work together in considering ethical questions while carrying out shared projects” (2002, 20).

No textbook was used in the course. Instead, contemporary academic and professional articles were used throughout, along with Maidment’s brief Annual Editions in Human Resources, 08/09 (2008). Assigned readings were selected from journals in full-text pdf format and placed on electronic reserve and the lessons tab of Penn State’s electronic course-management system, ANGEL. From two to five articles were assigned per class session.

Students were assigned to one of five teams of five or six individuals, with each team responsible for leading one class session. Each team was asked to relate the topic and readings to the general theme of the course: What is the responsibility of the HR professional to deal with a changing workforce that is undergoing a generational shift (Calo 2007; Crumpacker and Crumpacker 2007), seeing greater diversity in the form of demands for equity in race and ethnicity (Foldy 2004; Meier, Pennington, and Eller 2005; Robinson, Franklin, and Epermanis 2007), gender (Connell 2006; Dolan 2004; Guy and Newman 2004; Reid, Miller, and Kerr 2004), and disability (Kim 2007), and facing greater responsibilities to ensure that the workplace is free from sexual harassment (Gilbert 2005; Jackson and Newman 2004;), unsafe and illegal practices (Knowles and Riccucci 2001) and unethical behavior (Haraway 2005; Haraway and Kunselman 2006; Mitchell 1999)?

The readings were used to draw out from the group presentations discussions on how the ethically aware HR professional would act in situations described in the readings or drawn from students’ workplace experiences. Students were asked to evaluate the performance of the teams and other team members’ contributions. To promote civility in the classroom, these evaluations were not used by the instructor in assigning course grades, but instead as a diagnostic tool to help teams and individuals better understand how to improve their performance. Student evaluations of the course were highly positive, with many noting in open-ended responses that the course worked well in relating issues of ethics and diversity to real-world situations faced by HRM professionals. The standardized course rating for value of course and instructor were high: 6.7 on a 1–7 scale. Students rated highly those readings in particular that related how professionals dealt with ethical and diversity issues in the context of public sector work.
Conclusions

Ethics education in public administration has centered mostly on the need for at least one standalone ethics course taught by a specialist in the field. Some graduate programs, for a variety of reasons, may choose not to go this route; in such cases, a systematic way of introducing ethics into graduate courses is needed to ensure that ethics is addressed in graduate education. A matrix of ethics topics related to the entire MPA curriculum is ideal (Nelson and Van Hook 1998). Lacking such a comprehensive approach, ethics can be adequately covered by introducing basic ethical concepts in the program’s introductory foundation course and complementing this with an in-depth look at ethical issues dealing with HRM in subsequent courses.

HRM is heavily involved in issues that require enhanced ethical awareness on the part of professionals in the field. Likewise, such issues as managing a diverse workforce, enforcing rules about individual behavior, ensuring a safe and civil workplace, and dealing with the differing generational values increasingly affect public managers and public sector employees. The ethics/HRM connection, when presented to students in a systematic and logical manner, has the potential to illustrate that great many of the issues in HR are also issues of interest to ethicists.

A review of the literature on administrative ethics, ethics education, and HRM suggests that the closest connection between ethics and public administration lies, arguably, in the area of HR policy and management. Building on foundations in ethics and HRM in required core courses, an advanced course in HR like the one described above can serve as an effective vehicle to achieve greater awareness both of the ethical aspects of HR policy and management and of the need for HR professionals to become aware of the ethical responsibilities inherent in the HR function.

Note

1. To avoid confusion, we use the current term “human resource management” and its acronym HRM throughout the article to cover the field known also as personnel management; we use the term “human resources” and its acronym HR to cover the professional identification of those working in the field, so as to be consistent with the most recent usage in the field.

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