Ethics and Public Service

Ethics or the moral concept concerning what is right or wrong generally, or in a given situation or perhaps always is both an accepted notion in society and an expected and standard code of conduct in public service. But what is ethical a complex, sometimes relative and perhaps debatable topic. Historically the foundation of what is ethical was based on principles of reason, truth, context and a sense of a fixed right or wrong. Overtime, relativity and world views have influenced these principles and shifts to include credibility, justifiable consequence and multiple cultural traditions have shaded the conversation.

Despite these struggles to better define what is ethical, the role of the public servant is clear... a high and unquestioned standard exists. The following case scenario was developed by the Markkula Center of Applied Ethics of Santa Clara University (www.csu.edu/ethics).

The son of Mayor Maximum plays Little League baseball for the Blue Jays. The city annually awards the Little League a $5,000 community service grant to assist in its operations and waives the city park use fee for the League’s use of city ball fields. It is not clear from the information submitted by the League whether the city’s contribution reduces the cost that would otherwise have to be passed on to families of the Little Leaguers. The city does not have a policy prohibiting grants to organizations in which family members of city officials or employees participate.

The case study poses two questions: (1) should Mayor Maximum participate and vote on the grant award to the Little League?, and (2) would it matter if other members of the council had children participating in the Little League?

This simulation poses interesting questions. There are at least two ways that a public service professional may respond to questions regarding ethics. The first is to consult their professions accepted code of ethics. These standards are generally based on reasoned principles that have endured over time and seem reasonable and reflective of professional conduct. Most professions have statements of ethical behavior. The American Society of Public Administration has set five standards as their foundational principles. Within each of these broad concepts are more specific elements designed to help guard the public servant in moments that require ethical actions.
I. **Serve the Public** is based on commitments to: public interest, non discrimination, transparency, citizen involvement, fairness, public responsiveness, and assisting the citizen.

II. **Respect the Constitution and the Law** concerns itself with: understanding legislation, regulations and laws and the policies and procedures used to develop such. In addition, the administrator is committed to protection of public interest, funds, privileged information and citizen rights.

III. **Demonstrate Personal Integrity** is based on standards of truthfulness, honesty, respect, responsibility and to avoid partisanship and conflict of interests.

IV. **Promote Ethical Organization** is a concept designed to ensure that the organization has principles to guide its purpose such as: open communication, loyalty, accountability, due process, avoiding arbitrary actions and a periodic focus on ethics.

V. **Strive for Professional Excellence** is to strengthen the professional development of others by encouraging competence, currency within the profession, professionalism and service to the emerging professional.

These standards are helpful but may not provide sufficient direction in the variety of circumstances that public service employees find themselves. A second approach is to follow an ethics decision making model. There are a number of frameworks that assist as an individual works through more complex issues. The following steps may prove helpful:

**Step One:** Spend time thinking through the issue, question, circumstance or situation. Identify the various elements of the ethical dilemma in a thoughtful and reflective manner. In the Mayor Maximum case study, what are the issues?

**Step Two:** Clarify the goal of the decision. Of course the primary goal is to be ethical, but are there other forces that impact the decision making process, such as, convenience, expediency, usefulness, rightness, fairness, good for the greater group?

**Step Three:** Determine and gather the needed facts and data that surround the issue. This may involve personal contemplation, researching policies, consulting others, or seeking hidden information. What other information may be helpful to have available in the Mayor Maximum simulation?

**Step Four:** Develop and evaluate the options that seem most reasonable and logical. The basis for the options may be closely connected to the goal of being ethical or the other forces in play.
such as the impact on the greater good. What are Mayor Maximum’s possible options and importantly, the consequences of these options?

**Step Five:** Determine the decision, implement and study the consequence and value of the decision. When implementing the decision a number of self questions can be asked; how do I feel about the decision, how would the decision sound to others, how can the implementation be most carefully handled?

**Step Six:** Modify the decision if in fact it was poorly thought through, was misunderstood, did not achieve its objective or in some way did not meet the level of ethical standard that was set. This is a time of reflection, monitoring and adjusting if necessary. In the Mayor Maximum exercise, what would be the best decision, - what would be the poorest decision?

Ethics are a critically important concept in society, business and public service. What is ethical may change based on circumstances, context or local convention. Public servants have a high standard of expectation from society but also as a part of self regulation of the profession. Besides codes of ethics to guide complex issues, decision making models are also helpful.