

Ethical Decision-Making in Public Administration

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Abstract

Public administration and decision-making are intimately related with each other in organization. In most of the public administration, there can arise some problems which need solution. The solution should follow definite principle. An administrator is the architect of an organization. So an administrator should take into consideration ethical aspect in the making of decision. In order to bring peace and success to an organization, decision-maker (administrator) should practice ethical principle in his work place and his decision-making. The aim of this paper is to show the importance of ethics in decision-making. "Why does ethics play the vital role in decision-making?" is used as research problem. To solve the problem, descriptive and evaluative method will be used. When one makes ethical decision he/she should consider the needs and perspective of others. If one treats with honesty, fairness and respect in his/her work place, he/she can make decisions ethically. Ethics can help to build trust in an organization. An administrator can gain success in the workplace.

Key words: Public administration, Ethics, decision-making, administrator

Introduction

Nowadays the concept of ethics is discussed as the most hot and challenging issue in the field of public administration. But this discussion is not only theoretical aspect but also the practical perspective as the validity of ethical principles. Ethical principles can determine the behavior of a person. Here it needs adjustments in human actions, especially, in the field of administration as well as administrator's ethical ability in the making of decision process. The primary goal of public administration is to provide the accurate operation of ethical decision-making in public administration. In order to gain the goal, it is essential to motivate and encourage public administrators or decision makers to practice and perform ethically and taking into consideration the impact on the benefit of society.

A decision making is the outcome from consequential, preference choice of the administrator which obtains from the selection among the alternatives. Thus administration and decision-making are inseparable with each other. The process of decision-making should start with a conceptual analysis of what comprises an ethical situation. So this paper will focus on the ethical approach of decision-making in public administration by three main parts. First of all, the nature of ethics in public administration will be presented. After that the nature of decision-making will be explained. Lastly, the role of ethics in decision-making of public administration will be discussed.

Nature of Ethics in Public Administration

In the branches of philosophy, ethics is one of the branches. Basically, ethics studies moral or morality. Morality comes from the Latin word '*moralis*' which means custom or manner. Ethics is the differentiation of human actions and decisions between good and bad, right and wrong. In this sense, ethics is moral philosophy. Besides ethics formulates moral principles that can guide and provide a person's action and behavior. In other words, ethics can guide human beings such as how man should behave towards others, to be aware of their responsibilities. Ethics can apply any aspect of human conduct.

"The study of ethics requires being philosophical, rather than operating as if ethics were a mere matter of technique."²

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The field of ethics can be divided into three main parts. These are theoretical ethics, meta-ethics and applied ethics. This paper is mainly focused on applied ethics. In applied ethics, there are various sub-fields depend upon specialized area such as media ethics, bio-ethics, environmental ethics, administrative ethics and so on. Sometimes, these are called professional ethics. Professional means the expert person of their specialized field such as lawyer, doctor, manager etc. In other words, they are persons who exercise specialized knowledge and skill when supporting serves to public. Besides they are leaders of their organizations. So they can be called administrators. They make decision in their work place. In other words, they make public administration in society.

Public administration contains many professionals. To make management in their work place, every person who plays the role of leader needs to know about the ethics education. It is essential for public service. The aim of ethics education is to produce an administrator who knows how to do moral based judgments or moral based decision and whose behavior is ethical. Therefore, an administrator needs to know not only what is right but also the strength of character to perform what is right. On the other hand, ethics education is the basic of capacity building. Thus an administrator should have capacity to tolerate ambiguity and to respect different opinions among people.

According to D.C. Menzel, professor of public administration, there are five main goals in ethics education for public administration. These are as follows:

- “1. Fostering ethical conduct for public administration
2. Developing an awareness of ethical issues and problems
3. Cultivating an attitude of moral obligation and personal responsibility
4. Gaining greater knowledge of ethical standards in public administration, and
5. Building analytical skills in ethical decision-making”³

That is why, it may be said that the effective goal of ethics education are

- an awareness of ethical issues and problems in the field must be developed
- analytical decision-making skills must be built
- an attitude of moral obligation and personal responsibility must be nurtured.

Mainzer, professor of political science, argued in his book “**Vulgar ethics for public administration: Administration and society**” as follows:

“Ethics is the element most difficult to teach because we can hardly ever reasonably assume that we have succeeded in our goal: making a difference in how students will behave in their actual public administration responsibilities. We can teach about goodness, but we do not know that we can teach goodness.”⁴

Thus to perform action ethically, one should cultivate the sense of responsibility and obey the moral principles in practical life. The development of society depends upon the moral trustworthiness of its citizen and its leaders. In order to build good society, systems are important, but good character of people is more important. It can be regarded that system cannot be built without good character of people. Good character is a primary element for society. Good character is essential for administrators because they are leader of society. Good character can make accountability, responsibility, transparency, trustworthiness and good system. An administrator plays the model role in an organization or society. A good administrator is interested in the welfare of public and is not selfish. To be a good administrator or virtuous person, he should respect not only himself but also others. This is a

²T. R. Piper & M.C. Gentile & S.D. Parks (1993). *Can Ethics Be taught?* New York: McGraw-Hill. p.34.

³Terry L. Cooper. (2001). *Handbook of Administrative Ethics. 2nd*, New York: Marcel Dekker. p.66.

⁴Terry L. Cooper. (2001). *Handbook of Administrative Ethics. 2nd*, New York: Marcel Dekker. p.73.

fundamental principle of society. Virtue is also an essential element in life. The more people have virtue, the more their life will be peaceful and happy. The real good of virtue only occurs when a virtuous person is being fair to another who agrees in finding equality good. So each and every person has responsibility and accountability for his action as he/she is cooperating in the society. Thus the sense of virtue should intentionally be nurtured by oneself in practical life.

Nature of Decision-Making

Decision-making is the act of making a select among the different alternatives. In other words, it is a selecting the best among alternative facts. So it may be defined as choosing process of the best choice among the different options. Thus in order to choose the best, the decision-maker should evaluate all options i.e. advantages and disadvantages. It can provide to do the proper decision. According to Stephen P. Robbins (1943-), Professor emeritus of management, 'decision-making is defined as the selection of a preferred course of action from two or more alternatives.'⁵

In an organization, decision-making is a basic responsibility of an administrator. So firstly, he/she needs to define the issue and analyze the related factors to it. In other words, an administrator as a decision-maker must completely understand the issue. And then he/she should look at a decision from multi-dimension. Besides, it is necessary to understand what needs to be decided. In this respect, the purpose of decision is very important element. To collect the data, it is necessary to focus on how the current problem is affecting now. Situation is another important element in decision-making.

To make decision, administrator needs to know and understand the current situation. It is essential to understand all implications of the potential choice. Consequently, it is valuable to think of the perspectives of all people that will benefit for decision. Thus an administrator should identify the different alternatives and various options he/she encounter before starting to make analysis for decision. In this sense, it is required to apply the method of decision tree. Here decision tree is a decision supported material that can apply as a model of decision and their possible results. The decision tree can supply to lay out the alternatives and select the most proper one to consider. Sometimes in data analysis, there can appear error in decision because of bias. In this respect, it is necessary for an administrator to receive plenty of input others to avoid any bias.

Model of decision tree

Generally, a decision tree is a decision process that can be provided as tool for decision-making. Besides, it can apply as a structure graphical depiction of different options or alternatives. Decision tree, like tree, has a starting point after that branch out. Each and every branch represents different issue, function and result.

“Decision trees have three types of nodes at each part of the diagram.

1. Decision nodes: these are alternative themselves and represent the point where a decision must be made
2. Change nodes: these are points where choices must be made; in their simplest form these may be represented by Yes/No or Go/No Go options.
3. Conclusion or end nodes: these are points that appear when there no more alternatives or choiceto be; and they state the outcome of a particular decision branch.”⁶

Sometimes, bias can occur in the making of decision. In this respect, in order to avoid bias in making decision, an administrator should apply model of decision tree to assessment. To evaluate alternatives, an administrator must apply concrete and objective criteria and

⁵. <http://tyrocity.com>.

⁶Ibid.

choose the best among alternatives. An administrator must eliminate bias in decision-making. That is why, an administrator should do the best to identify personal emotion and other personal circumstances that can impact his judgment. To make decision, an administrator should do the best to eliminate or to minimize bias.

To minimize the bias in making the decision, an administrator should use prospect theory. This theory is introduced by Kahneman (1934-) and Tversky (1937-1996). This theory is mainly based on the notion that people think about decision in term of potential gains and losses and tend to be more averse to losses than they are more prefer to gains. In otherwords, an administrator may overstate the downside of an alternative, since they have a greater fear of negative outcomes. Consequently, people are biased toward less risky decisions, even when the effect of different options would outweigh the risks of the chosen one. Thus people should think how others would affect or be hurt by the result of their decision.⁷

According to above mentioned facts, it may be regarded that all of the decisions have an ethical perspective or moral dimension. The decision may affect others. A decision-maker of an organization or a society requires the awareness of his own ethical moral beliefs. Thus he/she can draw on them when he/she is faced with decision-making. Then he/she can properly and effectively think through ethical issue with the similar types of approaches for other decisions. That is why, an administrator should have sense of ethics in making the decision.

The Role of Ethics in Decision-Making of Public Administration

Decision-making is an essential component of public administration. The source of word administration derived from two Latin words '*ad*' and '*ministrare*' which means to serve. Generally, the term administration is an activity of group co-operating to gain common goals. L.D. White (1891-1958) said that administration is a 'process of common to all group effort, public or private, civil or military, large scale or small scale.' And then he also defined the word public administration. It consists of all those operations having for their purpose the fulfillment of public policy.⁸ In an organization, decision-making is the process to do strategic decision by an administrator or small group of decision makers. The effectiveness of the decision process mainly relied upon the skill and ethical knowledge of administrator or decision maker. So this paper mainly focuses on the ethical aspect of decision-making of administrator.

Ethics laid down moral norms that can guide human actions. All of the decision makers or administrators should have the ethical ideas. In practical life, an administrator should have predetermined moral principles in different levels in management organization. Decision-making is one of the administrative processes.

According to Herbert A. Simon (1916-2001),(economist, political scientist & cognitive psychologist),

“Decision are something more than factual propositions.... they are descriptive of a future state of affairs and this description can be true or false in a strictly empirical sense, but they possess an imperative quality, they select one future of state of affairs in preference to another and direct behavior towards the chosen alternatives. In short they have an ethical as well as factual content.”⁹

In an organizational management, there are different levels and different moral norms. Operational level deals with daily works repeating decision and formal duties. In this level, sense of duty is moral norm. In middle level, reasoning is moral norm. Here, it needs to accept

⁷Ibid.

⁸<http://www.legal service India.com>.

⁹. <http://www.yourarticlelibrary.com>.

the reports of operational level, to validate, to make comments and to pass to the strategic level. In the last level, an administrator should take responsibility for his/her decision with the sense of accountability. In this level, the sense of accountability is moral norm. In this strategic process, an administrator should make decision based on the reports of middle level. Furthermore, he/she should make balance between current situation and future possibility. And then a public administrator needs to adapt decision principles to social changes and situation changes. This principle should impact on commitment to the basic values of society and recognition of the aims of an organization.

According to these facts, it can be regarded that a public administrator is a leader of organization or of community as a guardian. Thus an administrator must be ethical in his/her actions and decisions. In other words, sense of ethics is the heart of an administrator. Without this sense the decision will fail and the impact of decision is dangerous for community or organization. In an organizational structure, public administrator encounters with many decisions that influence and impact not only organization but also society. Ethical decision-making can come from the institutional context for organization and community.

To make ethical decision-making, an administrator should know and understand the ethical situation which has ethical dimensions. According to Aristotle (385-323 BC),

“Ethics was fundamentally about choice (decision) and the pursuit of the good or happiness. Moral virtue (arete) is viewed by Aristotle as making choices that are in accordance with a principle of choosing the ‘mean’. The good life for Aristotle was to be achieved only in the political and social environment of the city-state. Thus moral virtue for Aristotle can understand as behaviors, decisions and choices which are in accordance with principles that would produce happiness.”¹⁰

In order to make ethical decision, an administrator should critically analyze the issue situation and choose the suitable ethical principles and standards that apply to situation. But some think why are principles and standards are necessary. The answer is that principles and standards, practically, can support for guidance and justification for actions and decisions.

“Ethical situation is taken to be essentially one in which ethical dimensions are relevant and deserve consideration in making some choice that will have significant impact on others. Ethical dimensions are those principles and standards that provide the basic guidelines for determining how conflicts in human interests are to be settled and for optimizing mutual benefit of people together in group.”¹¹

Basically, by applying of the principles and standards, making of decision can become consistent and logical because principled decision-making can avoid unpredictability and arbitrariness. So, ethical principles and standards are essential to ethical decision. And then some scholars regarded that

“The difficulty in discussion ethics in public administration is that ethical precepts do not have same precision and cohesion as law. Even a code of ethics does not possess the same clearly delineated, relatively well-articulated standards that positivist law exhibits. Ethical administrators are expected to ‘walk their talk’. While ethical standards may or may not be written down and publicized they are still lived and practiced. Ethical administrators constantly strive to ‘do the right thing’ even if it is not always clear what that is in a particular situation.”¹²

¹⁰. Terry L. Cooper. (2001). *Handbook of Administrative Ethics*. 2nd, New York: Marcel Dekker. p.482.

¹¹. J.R. Rest (1986). *Moral development: advances in research and Theory*, New York: Praeger. p.1

¹². J. Michalel. Martinez (2008). *Administrative Ethics in the Twenty-First Century*, New York: Peter Lang. p.100.

Moreover, in order to make ethical decision, it is necessary to make interpretation and judgment of the outcome or consequence of action. Generally, ethical decision composed of selecting not only between good and bad but also between good and better or between bad and worse. According to John Rohr (1934-2011), there are some primary propositions in the making of ethical decision. These are as follows:

- “1. Public administrators have significant discretion, such that they govern and set public policy, and their decisions have important ethical dimensions and impact on society
2. Public administrators have a responsibility to be guided by regime values in their decision-making. Regime values are basically those public and political values that have endured in our society. These values are normative because they are regime values and bureaucrats have taken an oath to uphold the constitution that brought this regime into being and continues to state symbolically its spirit and meaning.”¹³

Decision rules for ethical decision-making

In the history of thought, some philosophers have tried to formulate the general normative theories of ethics. These theories are mainly two kinds such as consequentialism and non-consequentialism. The clear understanding of these theories can provide the solving of ethical problems. And then it can gain reasonable and logical solutions. First of all, basic idea of utilitarianism as consequentialism is to produce the happiness as much as possible in society. Utilitarianism is mainly based on utility. In other words, utility is the basic principle of utilitarianism. Thus, in making of ethical decision, an administrator should be guided by the principle of utility. Consequently, administrator chooses the action that will get the greatest happiness. In this sense, it is necessary to take into account the interest and result for all affected by the making decision. According to these facts, an administrator needs to choose the greatest happiness that can constitute the ethically right things to perform.

In the Western thought, Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) are regarded as the founders of utilitarianism. Nowadays, the traditional old ethical ideas are being challenged. And then new ideas are formulated and promoted. Some new ideas composed the equality and individual's value in determining social affairs. Utilitarian who accepts the utilitarianism believed that action and practice do not depend upon right and wrong but absolutely depend upon consequences. According to utilitarian, decision can be justified in term of practical or predicted consequences. In public administration, some administrators practice this decision principle. And then they are charged with creating and implementing policy in the wider public interest. As a decision rule, it has limitation and weakness. In the above mentioned view, there are difficulties related to assessment of happiness.

Another approach is formalism as non-consequentialism. Formalism is a duty orientation approach for guiding and justifying of ethical decision-making. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) is the prominent philosopher of this theory. When facing ethical decision, Kant formulated a general process for determining what one ethical or moral duty is. This is known as categorical imperative as moral duty. Furthermore, Kant also proposed hypothetical imperative as conditional. It means that it relied upon the existence of individual interest and desire. According to Kant, of these imperatives, categorical imperative is unconditional but rather ought that are binding on all human beings as rational beings. This imperative supports a process for making decision of one's moral duty.

The formalist perspective supports the fundamental idea for ethical administrator in decision-making. The primary idea is duty as principle. In determining, 'what to do' or 'how to do' an administrator must seek the reason that other decision makers would be acceptable. After that an administrator has a duty to perform in accordance with such principle. As administrator is rational being, he/she should always pay respect for others' opinions.

¹³. Terry L. Cooper. (2001). *Handbook of Administrative Ethics. 2nd*, New York: Marcel Dekker. p.494

Concerning justice,

“In a theory of justice, John Rawls has provided the most significant contribution in developing a comprehensive theory of social justice. The important point here is that ethical decision-making often calls for a principle concerned with social justice”¹⁴

Process of ethical decision-making

In the process of decision-making, there are some basic facts. Firstly, a decision-maker must choose from different options. It is based on public administrative personal accountability or responsibility and value of public administrator. Here, administrator's decision must impact his/her respect for professional principles. Besides, in order to make decision, it is necessary to do some stages. These stages can provide for both objectivity and ethical nature of decision. In the first stage, it needs to define the issue which has to be solved. In this stage, it requires to search and examine the source of issues and problems. And then, it must identify and take into consideration of other options. When solving difficult issues and problems which influence the whole society or organization, an administrator should not make immediate decision. In this sense, it is necessary to base on principle based theory and virtue ethics which provide centers on the society standards. These facts play in second stage. The third stage is focused on the fundamental principles of law and public policies. In the fourth stage, it is necessary to identify the consequence. This stage is mainly based on consequentialist approach. This stage contains the evaluation of all effects on organization and society. The fifth stage is tried to find out diverse ideas or perspectives. The sixth stage is composed of selecting the final decision and action. In the final stage, an administrator needs to perceive and look at his/her decision from different point of views and from a new perspective. In this respective, the creative ability of administrator is very important.¹⁵

Therefore, an administrator should practice these stages in making the ethical decision in organization or community. By using these model stages, administrator can make decision effectively in workplace.

Conclusion

Most of the people believed that ethics is the heart of decision maker or administrator in an organization. In this sense, it may be regarded that a good leader or administrator should be an ethical person in work place. In any public administration, an administrator is faced with various ethical dilemmas. Ethical dilemma means choosing between two different options but both are right to accept. In this situation, it is important and difficult for an administrator to make a decision. In other words, they are conflicting but they have essential values. They constitute ethical dilemma. Hence, in order to make ethical decision, an administrator must have ethical attitude and knowledge.

Moreover, to establish ethical decision-making, first of all, an administrator must accept how individual settle on the making the ethical decision in public organization. The development and succession of an organization depend on the quality of decision-maker's management to make good and effective decisions. Thus,

“An inseparable part of effective and importantly, ethical management is determined by ethical decision-making process which may be defined as a conscious and reasonable decision in compliance with professional ethics.”¹⁶

¹⁴ .Terry L. Cooper. (2001).*Handbook of Administrative Ethics.2nd*, New York: Marcel Dekker. p.502.

¹⁵ . <http://www.ejournals.eu.Plik>art>.

¹⁶ . Ibid.

Thus, it may be regarded that to make an effective public administration, it is essential to have an ethical perspective. Besides in order to be effective for an organization, it needs to continuously nurture and cultivate the ethical context which is an assurance of an organization success, development and survival. Thus, an administrator must take into account to think several probable options. Moreover, it is also necessary to consider the ethical result of the decision they make. An administrator must avoid from suddenly making decision. In the decision-making process, if one emphasizes one's personal attitude or non-objective evaluation of certain situation or negative personal behavior or one's social background then the decision cannot be fair and right. To sum up, in order to improve the ethical environment in public administration bodies and organizations the whole levels, administrator must follow the following facts.

- The development and regular review of ethics policies and procedures.
- The promotion of government action to impose ethical standards
- The incorporation of ethics into administrative reforms and management practices.
- The integration of procedural rules and ethical values¹⁷

Ethical principle based decision-making can provide a guide to reduce wrong and weak decision-making. Moreover, it can help produce effective decision-making. Besides, it can provide to eliminate unacceptable an unreasonable emotionality in decision-making. So it can be used as rational judgment when making decision in public administration. That is why, ethics plays the vital role in ethical decision-making of public administration.

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¹⁷. Ibid.