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Instytut Organizacji i Zarządzania
Wydział Cybernetyki
Wojskowa Akademia Techniczna
w Warszawie

Institute of Organization and Management
Faculty of Cybernetics
Military University of Technology

Peculiarities of working culture and ethics in the public sector

Specyfika kultury pracy i etyki w sektorze publicznym

Dalia Perkumienė

Aleksandras Stulginskis University, Lithuania

Abstract. Conflicts in the work of public sector officers are the negative phenomena, due to their impact on the person itself and the people around – customers, colleagues. Moreover, it has negative impact on the efficiency of work, communication, working atmosphere.

Culture – the informal aspects of organizations – are the values, beliefs, ethics, and motives of individual participants in addition to the shared norms and understandings that broadly characterize the organization or its subunits.

The article analyses peculiarities of ethics and working culture in the public sector. Author tries to reveal and evaluate the peculiarities of the ethic and working culture of the Klaipėda municipality employees in Lithuania.

Keywords: working culture, ethics, employees, public sector.

Abstrakt: Konflikty w pracy urzędników sektora publicznego są zjawiskiem negatywnym z powodu wpływu, jaki wywierają zarówno na samą skonfliktowaną osobę, jak i ludzi wokół niej – klientów i współpracowników. Ponadto konflikt niekorzystnie wpływa na wydajność pracy, komunikację, atmosferę pracy.

Kultura – nieformalne aspekty organizacji – to wartości, przekonania, etyka i motywy poszczególnych uczestników, oprócz wspólnych norm i porozumień, które ogólnie charakteryzują organizację lub jednostki wewnątrz niej.

Artykuł analizuje specyfikę etyki i kultury pracy w sektorze publicznym. Autorka stara się opisać i ocenić specyfikę etyki i kultury pracy pracowników gminy Klaipėda na Litwie.

Słowa kluczowe: kultura pracy, etyka, pracownicy, sektor publiczny

Introduction

Ethics covers various areas of life: personal, public and professional relations. Personal ethics studies the well-being of certain individual and his development methods. Social ethics emphasizes well-being of society, duties of individual persons in the society. In the professional ethics main attention is paid to the behaviour of the representatives of special field (Raipa, 2001).

Employees working in public sector inevitably stuck with ethic and working culture problems. Perhaps even more often than the representatives of other fields, because they are constantly communicating with people, help them to solve their problems every day, inform people about new products (Wagner-Tsukamoto, 2005).

When having some contact with employees, people judge the morality and working culture of higher officers and all sector according to their behaviour (Chen, 2005). Therefore ethic and working culture of public sector employees should be as high as possible. Ethic is important not only in communication with customers (external environment), it's important also internally in the organization, in the mutual relations between colleagues and staff members (Paliduskaitė, 2001).

Ethical problems might cause various different consequences. Some of them are solved almost unnoticed; the others have strong impact separate persons or organizations. Ethical problems might occur and disappear or have continuous character.

The purpose of the work – to disclose peculiarities of ethics and working culture of the employees.

Object of the work – ethic and working culture of the employees.

Methods of the work – analysis of scientific literature, analysis of legislation, survey with questionnaire, statistic analysis of the data, graphical modelling, specifying and summarizing and logical abstraction.

Research results

In our everyday life we use notions of ethics, morality, virtue and other similar quite widely. However not always we think about their content and significance. Sometimes we refer these notions in wrong places, very often we identify them, use them as synonyms. However we shouldn't mix these notions and divide them: ethic is a field of certain knowledge, science; morality and virtue – are its research subjects (Kulik, 2005).

From a historical perspective, the cultural norm placing a positive moral value on doing a good job because work has intrinsic value for its own sake was a relatively recent development (Lipset, 1990). Work, for much of the ancient history of the human race, has been hard and degrading. Working hard-in the absence of compulsion – was not the norm for Hebrew, classical, or medieval cultures (Rose, 1985).

It was not until the Protestant Reformation that physical labour became culturally acceptable for all persons, even the wealthy.

Concept "Ethics" has its background from ancient Greek word "Ethos". This word meant in the beginning usual place of living (in the poems of Homer) later it acquired new meanings: "habits, temperament, custom, character" (Fassin, 2005).

The work ethic is a cultural norm that places a positive moral value on doing a good job and is based on a belief that work has intrinsic value for its own sake (Cherrington, 1980; Quinn, 1983; Yankelovich, Immerwahr, 1984). Like other cultural norms, a person's adherence to or belief in the work ethic is principally influenced by socialization experiences during childhood and adolescence. Through interaction with family, peers, and significant adults, a person "learns to place a value on work behaviour as others approach him in situations demanding increasing responsibility for productivity" (Braude, 1975, p. 134). Based on praise or blame and affection or anger, a child appraises his or her performance in household chores, or later in part-time jobs, but this appraisal is based on the perspective of others.

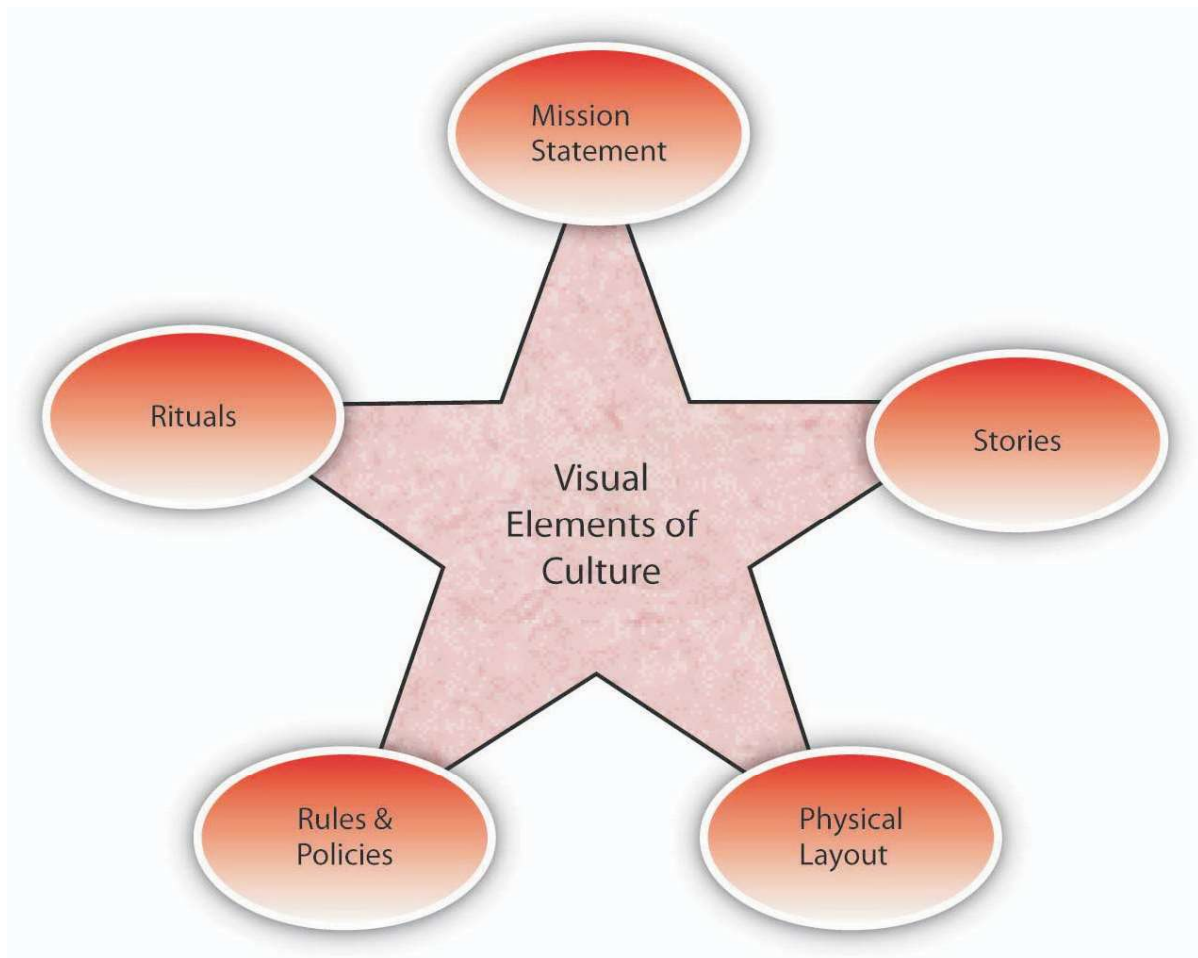


Fig. 1. Visual Elements of Culture
Source: Jarnagin, Slocum, 2007

Another significant factor shaping the work attitudes of people is the socialization which occurs in the workplace. As a person enters the workplace, the perceptions and reactions of others tend to confirm or contradict the work attitudes shaped in childhood (Braude, 1975). The occupational culture, especially the influence of an "inner fraternity" of colleagues, has a significant impact on the attitudes toward work and the work ethic which form part of each person's belief system.

Ethical working self-concept refers to the degree to which employees make the ethical values of the organization part of their concept of who they are and what is expected of them as members of that organization (Lord, Brown, 2001).

Jarnagin and Slocum (2007) points to some elements of the working culture.

According to a researcher (Randall, Cote, 1991; Fodor, 1990), work ethic can induce employees to be highly involved in their jobs.

Ahmad (1976) argued that the Islamic work ethic stands not for life denial but for life fulfilment and holds business motives in the highest regard. Consequently, it is more likely that those who believe in Islam and practice it tend to be more committed to their organizations and presumably more satisfied with their jobs.

Work ethics – of whatever variety – involve the ascription of value to work. Work is valued as the means to some end¹. And, being bound up with the attainment of some state of affairs which is valued, people are motivated to work (Gay, Pryke, 2007).

Besides work ethics, another important thing that comes under consideration which influences organizational commitment is organizational culture. In today organization environment, corporate culture is used as powerful tools to quantify the way a business functions (Gray et al., 2003).

All workplace cultures are not created equal. Some are more ethical than others. The first step to improving a culture is to assess its current state. Ethical cultures are measured by looking at three factors: ethical content, how well ethics are put into practice in the organization's everyday operations and how well each individual adheres to ethical behaviours (Briggs and Morgan P.A., The Kenrich Group, 2013).

The work ethics, as we know today, is a secularized construct derived from Max Weber which is written in his writing more than 100 years ago. Protestant work ethics has been widely used as an explanation for the successful of capitalism in Western (Hill, 1995), even though Islam has emerged globally but Muslim societies are very much influenced by Western work ethics, and Malaysia is not exceptional.

Culture is one of the biggest determinants of how employees behave. Strong cultures have two common elements: there is a high level of agreement about what is valued, and a high level of intensity with regard to those values. Of course, not all cultures encourage good or ethical behaviours. When it comes to developing world-class ethics and compliance programs, the starting point is a positive culture of integrity (DELOITTE, 2015).

1 Including the possibilities that work itself serves as the end or that work is not valued *per se*.

Ethical workplace cultures prioritize self-transcendence values such as, compassion, care, honesty and the responsibility to uphold the rights of all persons and of nature. These other regarding values trump self-enhancing values such as wealth, power, pleasure and fame. In fact, contrary to popular belief, people the world over prioritize self-transcending, ethical values over self-enhancing values (Schwartz, 2012).

Ethics is not simply a glorified intellectual game, of no practical relevance. We become moral individuals, as Aristotle says, by practice; good at being truthful by habitually telling truth; becoming characteristically honest by trying always not to be dishonest (Vallance, 2001).

The most effective ethical workplace cultures weave ethical values seamlessly into every aspect of their work (Briggs and Morgan P.A., The Kenrich Group, 2013).

Workplaces with strong positive cultures create trusting relationships with stakeholders. Those relationships become reciprocal; that is, stakeholders trust the organization and the brand. This creates employee, customer, and supplier loyalty. A strong culture helps to build positive relationships with regulators and it helps attract long-term investors. Ultimately, a culture of integrity is reflected in superior, long-term performance (DELOITTE, 2015).

Ethic is a matter of science, validating moral issues rising between human being and surroundings, in the mutual relations of human beings, among people related by various connections (Kučinskis, 2003; Gudas, 2000).

Lithuanian authors present various descriptions of ethics. G. Beržinskas (2002) describes the ethics as a philosophy of morality, theory, the human activity which purpose in internal perfection of the personality.

D. Vyšniauskienė (1999) in the book *Verslo etika* [Business ethics] provides with this kind of notion of ethics: Ethic is practical philosophy talking about human behaviour in his practical activity. V. Kučinskis (2003) defines the ethic as a subject of science, validating moral issues, rising between human being and his surroundings, mutual human relations and relations among human beings related to each other by various connections; it's a branch of philosophy analysing values and evaluating human acts.

Culture is the environment that surrounds you at work all of the time. Culture is a powerful element that shapes your work enjoyment, your work relationships, and your work processes. But, culture is something that you cannot actually see, except through its physical manifestations in your work place (Heathfield, 2010).

An organization's culture is made up of all of the life experiences each employee brings to the organization. Culture is especially influenced by the organization's founder, executives, and other managerial staff because of their role in decision making and strategic direction (Heathfield, 2010).

In order to disclose importance of ethics and working culture of the employees we have chosen municipality of Klaipėda region² for the research. Empirical research survey was performed in order to find out the ethical and working culture problems of the employees of public sector, municipality of Klaipėda region, when the employees were interviewed. The period of the research – January-March 2016. There were investigated 92 employees working in Klaipėda municipality.

After the analysis of the empirical research data was done. It can be stated that 65% of the respondents are familiar with legal regulations regulating ethics of the employees and working culture, 20% – partly and 15% unfamiliar.

Respondents were asked how they understand the ethics. Most of the respondents – 65% answered that ethics is a science about the norms of behaviour, morality. 35 % stated that this is science researching morality and virtue.

Even 87% of the interviewed stated that they are following special rules of ethics and working culture in their job, 13% didn't knew anything about such rules.

In Fig. 2 there is presented the spread of the opinion of the employees concerning what should follow the officer when performing his job.

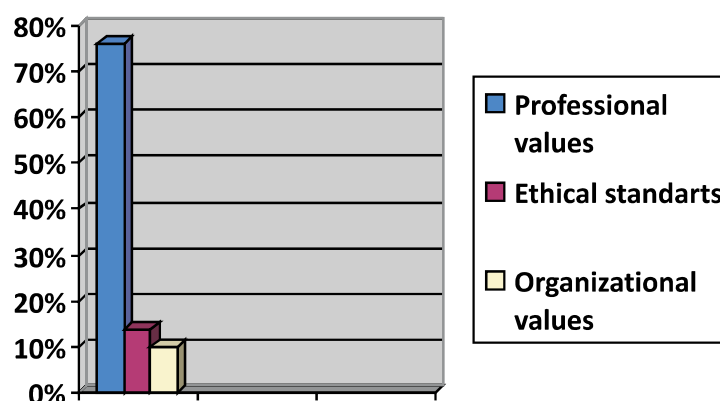


Fig. 2. Spread of the answers of the respondents what should follow the employee when performing his job

Source: own development

76% of the interviewed think that they should follow professional values and standards, 14% – ethical standards, 10% – organizational values. It shows that professional and organizational values are more important for the employees of public sector than personal ones. This is a good sign because that is the difference of the officers in public sector from the officers in private sector.

2 The questionnaires were distributed between employees of public sector, Klaipėda regional municipality.

The opinions were spread more or less equally concerning the question which principle of public service is hardest to implement. It can be seen in Fig. 3.

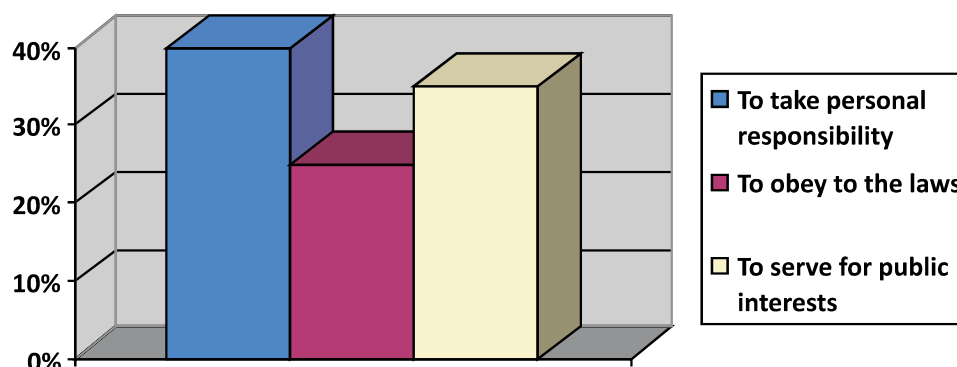


Fig. 3. Spread of the answers of the respondents which principle of public sector is the hardest to implement

Source: own development

The hardest is to take personal responsibility for 40% of the respondents, it is hard to obey to the laws and implement them for 25% of the employees. As one of the employees has mentioned it is the hardest part to obey to the laws, because laws are changing constantly, and sometimes they are really very confusing, complicated and absurd. 35% of the interviewed stated that the hardest thing is to serve for public interests.

It is thought that the activity of the employees' public sector should be honest. It means that it should be fair, open, correspond to the existing norms of behaviour and always increase the welfare of people. However sometimes under certain circumstances the situation requires not to be completely open and tell the real truth because of completely understandable good intentions or precautions. Sometimes the circumstances make us say that the silence is best thing, sometimes it is thought that "the truth should be used economically"; sometimes it's better to lie or to confuse.

Most of respondents negatively evaluate giving or acceptance of gifts, or grafts, because they treat it as a beginning of corruption (56%), attempt to bribe, to gain the employee to the side (44%).

To the answer what is a gift for the job done 72% of the respondents answered that its flowers, the others have mentioned candies, verbal or written thanks, special literature, helping to perform the job better, souvenirs.

Effective workplace cultures ensure compliance by making values and ethical expectations the norms, values and expectations in a multitude of ways across a wide array of communications. They also use the other elements of ethical culture to raise employees' ethical commitment far above the bare minimum required by law and social convention (Briggs and Morgan P.A., The Kenrich Group, 2013).

All employees who participated in the survey confirmed with one accord that they treat as graft money, most some other material values; the others have mentioned drinks, souvenirs, candies.

The research which was done helped to know the ethical and working culture problems of the employees of Klaipėda municipality; to find out their point of view to the ethical problems, they actions when facing one or another kind of problem.

Conclusions

- Organizations are unlikely to have just a single overarching culture. Instead, multiple cultures or subcultures are often present. Organizational cultures are shared experiences resulting from both low-and high profile successes and failures, patterns of conduct, and self-regulating practices.
- Ethic and working culture in the work of public sector is nonetheless important than in the work of other professions, because they have to communicate with people every day.
- Work culture change is a process of give and take by all members of an organization. Formalizing strategic direction, systems development, and establishing measurements must be owned by the group responsible for them.
- Conflicts in the work of public sector are the negative appearance, because of their negative impact on the person itself and the people around – customers, colleagues. It has negative impact on the efficiency of work, communication, working atmosphere.
- The employees of Klaipėda municipality who participated in the survey agreed with the opinion that the standards of ethics applicable to the public officers are stricter than those applied to ordinary citizens and also the proper image of the employee helps to support public confidence in service.

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