THE RESPONSIBLE ADMINISTRATOR

An Approach to Ethics for the Administrative Role

TERRY L. COOPER
The
Responsible
Administrator
Contents

Preface to the Fifth Edition vii
Acknowledgments xv
The Author xix
1 Introduction 1
2 Understanding Ethical Decision Making 13

Part One: Ethics for Individual Administrators 43
3 Public Administration in Modern and Postmodern Society: The Context of Administrative Ethics 45
4 Administrative Responsibility: The Key to Administrative Ethics 80
5 Conflicts of Responsibility: The Ethical Dilemma 106

Part Two: Ethics in the Organization 145
6 Maintaining Responsible Conduct in Public Organizations: Two Approaches 147
7 Integrating Ethics with Organizational Norms and Structures 183
8 Safeguarding Ethical Autonomy in Organizations: Dealing with Unethical Superiors and Organizations 220

Part Three: The Design Approach 267
9 Applying the Design Approach to Public Administration Ethics 269
10 Conclusion: Responsible Administration 282
References 300
Index 315
As I write these introductory comments for the fifth edition of *The Responsible Administrator*, I am struck by the fact that when I wrote the first edition, I never envisioned that the field of administrative ethics would grow so robustly that there would be four subsequent editions of this book. Indeed, this fifth edition is testimony not only to the growth of the field, but to the continued relevance of administrative ethics and the problem of responsibility. This fifth edition seeks to acknowledge the changes in the field and the advances in research while remaining true to the basic framework of the first edition.

*The Responsible Administrator* was written for students and practitioners of public administration who want to develop their ethical as well as technical competence. It is for men and women in public service, or preparing for it, who sometimes worry about the right thing to do, but who either have not taken the time to read books on ethical theory or suspect that such treatises would not be helpful at the practical level.

The education, training, and day-to-day practice of public administrators tend to be dominated by the practical problems of getting the job done. Concerns about what should be done and why it should be done get swept aside by the pressures of schedule and workload. Modern society is preoccupied with action, to the exclusion of reflection about values and principles. Theory is diminished to theories that concern means—“how to” crowds out “toward what end?”

Ethical theory, in particular, tends to suffer under the sway of this mentality. Because ethics involves substantive reasoning about obligations, consequences, and ultimate ends, its immediate utility for a producing and consuming society is suspect. Principles and values, “goods” and “oughts,” seem pretty wispy stuff compared
to cost-benefit ratios, GNP, tensile strength, organizational structures, assembly lines, budgets, downsizing, deadlines, outsourcing through contracts, interest group lobbying, and political pressures. The payoff for dealing formally with ethics is unclear for individual administrators and for organizations as well.

The result is a tendency either to totally ignore the study of ethics or to deal with it superficially. A study conducted by the Hastings Center two years before the first edition of this book was published revealed that “few higher-education institutions offer courses in ethics” (Watkins, 1980, p. 10). The researchers attributed this neglect primarily to the controversial nature of the teaching of ethics. Academicicians apparently had difficulty agreeing on who should teach these courses, as well as some apprehension about “the dangers of indoctrination” (p. 10).

Since 1980 interest in administrative ethics seems to have mushroomed. (See Cooper, 2001b, for a review of the emergence of ethics as a field of study.) The demand for in-service training sessions has increased substantially, more articles on ethics have appeared in the professional literature, sessions on ethics have grown in number and attendance at the annual conference of the American Society for Public Administration (ASPA), and in 1989 ASPA conducted its first national conference on governmental ethics in Washington, D.C., with seven hundred participants, including both practitioners and scholars. ASPA now has a standing Section on Ethics (see www.aspaonline.org/ethicscommunity), which boasts a membership of four hundred scholars and practitioners and has hosted a number of conferences, including the first international conference in 2005. It publishes a thirty- to forty-page online electronic newsletter four times annually that has won the Best Section Newsletter Award from ASPA every year since its inception almost ten years ago.

In 1991 the first Conference on the Study of Government Ethics was held in Park City, Utah. The conference was led by George Frederickson and sponsored by the Section on Public Administration Research of ASPA, the Ethics in Public Service Network, the Institute of Public Management of Brigham Young University, and the Public Administration Program at the University of Utah. This two-day event focused on research on public ethics, the fifty to sixty participants consisting mostly of scholars from
around the nation. The nine sessions, with a total of twenty-one presentations, covered topics including Ethics and Organizational Controls, Ethics and Independent Controls: The Role of Commissions, Ethics and Professional Culture, Codes of Ethics, Administrators’ Attitudes Toward Ethics and Professional Conduct, Legislative and Political Corruption and Ethics, Conflicts of Interest, Policy Ethics, and Organizational Ethics. The range of topics, participants, and research methods reflected in the program indicated that serious research was well under way on public ethics.

The next major milestone was the National Symposium on Ethics and Values at the Public Administration Academy in Tampa, Florida, in 1995, organized by James Bowman and Donald Menzel. This was the first national forum for examining the treatment of values and ethics in curricula, academic professional ethics, the ethical dimensions of faculty-student relations, research ethics, virtue approaches to ethics education, and the role of the academy in educating ethics officials in government. More than a hundred persons, mostly academics, participated in the two and a half days of deliberations, including thirty-one presentations.

The rapid development of research on administrative ethics is reflected in the publication of the first *Handbook of Administrative Ethics* (Cooper, 1994). The second edition of this volume (Cooper, 2001a), an overview of the state of the art in administrative ethics research, contains thirty-four chapters by forty-one scholars from around the world. The first edition of this book would have been inconceivable only ten years earlier; the expansion of the second edition after just six years is testament to the growth and relevance of the field. I have recently examined some of the major research questions before us in “Big Questions in Administrative Ethics: A Need for Focused, Collaborative Effort” (2004a).

Another important indication that administrative ethics had passed beyond the academic fad stage was the 1997 publication of *Public Integrity Annual*, sponsored by the Council of State Governments and ASPA. This book included chapters by both academics and practitioners and focused largely on practical administrative problems and applications (Bowman and Ensign, 1997). It was so well received that it is now a quarterly scholarly journal, *Public Integrity*, currently edited by James S. Bowman. It is currently considered a very high-quality journal on administrative ethics.
In spite of these significant developments in scholarship, the academy nevertheless seemed slow to adapt to these trends in the curricula of professional education for the field. April Hejka-Ekins (1988) surveyed 139 of the more than 200 schools and departments that belong to the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) and found that only 66 (31.4 percent) had offered an ethics course during 1985–86 and 1986–87. It appears that academe responded weakly to the emerging interest in ethics; there was a disturbing lag in developing courses as part of the core curriculum of public administration education.

Although it now seems that the treatment of ethics in graduate courses in public administration is growing, there are no current comprehensive statistics on the number of programs offering or requiring ethics courses. Fragmentary data suggest that graduate programs are increasing their emphasis on ethics. Catron and Denhardt (1994) reviewed the thirty-nine NASPAA self-study reports for 1989–91 and found that 18 percent not only offered ethics courses but required them. This amounted to a substantial increase in the number of required courses over an earlier study they conducted. Menzel (1997) indicates that 78 of the 225 NASPAA programs (35 percent) he surveyed in 1996 now offer ethics courses. My own review of the curricula of the twelve programs ranked in the top ten by *U.S. News and World Report* (March 20, 1996) indicates that eight (67 percent) offer an ethics course and four (33 percent) do not. None requires such a course.

The number of freestanding courses devoted entirely to ethics does not really tell the whole tale, however. Catron and Denhardt (1994, p. 52) point out that in 1989, a new NASPAA curriculum standard went into effect mandating that “the common curriculum components shall enhance the student’s values, knowledge, and skills, to act ethically and effectively.” In the self-study report instructions adopted in December 1996 (National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration, 1996), this was made more specific:

4.21 Common Curriculum Components

The common curriculum components shall enhance the student’s values, knowledge, and skills to act ethically and effectively:
In the Management of Public Service Organizations, the components of which include: Human resources; Budgeting and financial processes; Information, including computer literacy and applications.

In the Application of Quantitative and Qualitative Techniques of Analysis, the components of which include: Policy and Program formulation, implementation and evaluation; Decision-making and problem-solving.

With an Understanding of the Public Policy and Organizational Environment, the components of which include: Political and legal institutions and processes; Economic and social institutions and processes; Organization and management concepts and behavior.

This section is followed by a further requirement to indicate how ethical conduct is cultivated:

4.21.B. Ethical Action: Describe how the curriculum enhances “students’ values, knowledge, and skills to act ethically and effectively.”

In the current standards revised in January 2002, the standards concerning ethics education are essentially the same except the 4.21.b requirement to spell out how the curriculum accomplishes the kind of ethics outcomes that are desired has been dropped.

The adoption of curriculum standards and reporting requirements by NASPAA has likely led to some treatment of ethics in all of the NASPAA programs, but that does not mean that all will have separate courses. In many cases, ethics has been integrated broadly into the curriculum by incorporating modules in various courses on management, policy analysis, human resources, public finance, quantitative methods, and research design. Responses to a query sent out on the NASPAA listserv about ethics courses produced responses that suggested that many programs prefer this approach and in some cases are too small to be able to offer a separate ethics course. For a period of about ten years, Robert Cleary, now an emeritus professor at American University, analyzed the NASPAA directory listings every two years and confirmed in a personal e-mail message that integration into courses on other subjects is the predominant mode of delivery. The possibility of requiring a free-standing course in all NASPAA accredited programs has been
raised a number of times at both NASPAA and ASPA conferences but has received little support beyond those whose focus is administrative ethics.

At an earlier stage, there seemed to have been an uneasiness with the formal study of ethics rooted in an assumption that ethics is simply a matter of relativity and subjectivity. In a pluralistic society, where no one religious or cultural tradition is dominant, ethics has been viewed as a private, individual matter, not susceptible to the canons of rational inquiry. To address the study of ethics openly in an academic setting was thought to run the risk of either creating unresolvable conflicts among those who hold differing ethical perspectives or unfairly propagandizing for one particular point of view. However, Americans appear to have become more comfortable with the topic of ethics in public life and with offering academic courses on the subject or treatment of it in courses on other topics. One change since the fourth edition is that the role of religious faith and belief in public administrative ethics has become an increasing point of controversy in conferences and on the Section on Ethics “Ethtalk” listserv, although it has not yet surfaced in a major way in publications.

Although significant progress seems to have been made in accepting the legitimacy of studying administrative ethics, it is still true that once students leave school, they are probably not well equipped to think about the ethical problems they face regularly on the job and shape their conduct accordingly. Yoder and Denhardt (2001) argue, “No guarantee exists that even if public administration/affairs schools integrate and teach ethics in the most effective manner, administrators will practice what they have learned and act ethically” (p. 74). The mere acceptance of the academic legitimacy of ethics still sends a clear message to those preparing for careers in public service that it is not a top priority. The essential value-orientedness of the field of public administration remains largely unacknowledged. We should not be surprised, then, to see expedience and technical considerations dominate decision making. Even when ethical issues are recognized, often they are considered hopelessly frustrating and beyond the domain of rational analysis. We can predict that decisions involving value conflicts will not be engaged as systematically, seriously, or openly as matters of economics, politics, and organizational survival. Menzel
concludes his 1997 study on the impact of ethics courses with the assertion that ethics instruction has definitely found a niche in public administration schools and that however the topic is handled in the classroom, it seems to be making a difference in the professional lives of the students—but not enough of a difference. So there is still work to be done by those who believe that competence in ethical analysis and decision making are central to the field and should shape administrative practice.

Practitioners, however, do seem to have recognized the importance of ethics in their professional roles. Bowman and Williams’s 1997 study of 750 public managers who are ASPA members concludes, “The respondents indicate that ethics is hardly a fad and that government has the obligation to set the example in society. They further hold that ethics in the workplace can be empowering, although not all organizations and their leaders have a consistent approach to accomplish this. The findings emphasize the key role of leadership—both by its presence and absence—in encouraging honorable public service” (p. 525). Their empirical findings reflect a substantial increase in the importance attributed to ethics by public administrators as compared to a similar study published by Bowman in 1990. This is a hopeful sign; perhaps academe will respond to these perceptions of practitioners more forthrightly in the years ahead.
Acknowledgments

Twenty-four years since the first edition of *The Responsible Administrator* was published, my intellectual honesty and humility still require admitting that writing a book is not a task for which an author ought to take sole credit. The more I write and reflect, the more I interact with students in the classroom, and the more I converse with colleagues around the world, the clearer it becomes that scholarship is truly a collective enterprise.

I am indebted to the many undergraduate students who have taken my course in Citizenship and Public Ethics as part of the undergraduate program in the School of Policy, Planning, and Development at the University of Southern California. Their blunt questions and serious challenges have deepened my thinking and forced me to be clearer in expressing my views. Their interest in the subject of public ethics and the intensity of their struggles with their own professional obligations have stimulated lively debates that have caused me to rethink my own perspective.

I express my deepest appreciation to the women and men at all levels of American public service who have shared their struggles, insights, and creativity with me. Their cases and ensuing discussions in ethics workshops I have conducted since 1975, as well as in my graduate course on Public Ethics more recently, are the empirical basis for this book and a major source of any knowledge I may be able to pass along. I have been deeply impressed by their intention to do the right thing in the face of formidable impediments. I hold their contributions to ethics in public administration in respectful trust and pass it along as their gift to the reader.

I thank my colleagues around the world who are teaching and engaging in research on administrative ethics. Our numbers have grown substantially since 1982 when *The Responsible Administrator* first appeared. Through sessions at the annual conferences of
ASPA and at other smaller meetings in the United States, Canada, Hong Kong, France, Belgium, and Australia, I have observed that a genuine community of scholars and practitioners is emerging worldwide that is committed to the development of public administrative ethics. In particular, I thank Terry Lui, formerly on the faculty of the University of Hong Kong, for collaborating with me on two research projects on administrative ethics in Hong Kong during my year there as a Fulbright Professor in 1989, and again during the 1993–1997 period. Working with her has enriched and expanded my understanding of public sector ethics.

My thanks also go to the reviewers, who once again carefully examined the previous edition of this book and gave me their constructive advice, and to Allison Brunner at Jossey-Bass, whose competent editorial guidance has been invaluable.

I express again my continuing gratitude to my dearest and best colleague, my wife, Megan, whose inspiration, insights, writing skill, knowledge of the field of public administration, practical insights, and personal support have been freely and warmly given since the first edition, and again at every stage of this project.

I must also acknowledge a moral guide in my life who has become more insistent and instructive since the previous edition, my daughter, Chelsea. Throughout her twenty-one years of life, she has caused me to take my own ethics more seriously. Her honest and direct questions have called me up short and caused me to reflect. Her “Why?” questions and her observations about the gap between what I say and what I do have deepened my moral life. This book has made its way through four previous editions as she has grown up. Observing her own moral development from infancy to young adulthood has illuminated my understanding of how we humans are most fundamentally valuing creatures.

Finally, I express my deep appreciation to Diane Yoder, whose scholarly knowledge and superb writing and editorial skills have been absolutely essential in getting this fifth edition to press. During the months preceding the publication deadline, I struggled with health problems, and Diane stepped in to handle the final editing process. She is a teacher and scholar of administrative ethics with whom I have collaborated on other work, and I look forward to further collaborative efforts with her.
All of these people and many others have helped to broaden and sharpen my thoughts. I deeply appreciate their gifts to me and hope that what I have done with them in these pages is worthy of their respect.

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TERRY L. COOPER
The Author

Terry L. Cooper is The Maria B. Crutcher Professor in Citizenship and Democratic Values (Social Ethics) at the University of Southern California (USC). His research centers on citizen participation and public ethics. He is one of the coprincipal investigators in the USC Neighborhood Participation Project (NPP), conducting research on the role of neighborhood organizations in governance in the City of Los Angeles through the system of neighborhood councils established in 1999. Also, he is the director of the USC Civic Engagement Initiative, which is expanding the work of the NPP beyond neighborhood councils and beyond Los Angeles.


Cooper has previously served as chair of the Section on Ethics of the American Society for Public Administration. He has conducted ethics training for many professional groups at different levels of government around the United States and in several other countries.
The
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Chapter One

Introduction

*The Responsible Administrator* is one attempt to respond to the need for a systematic treatment of public administrative ethics that is grounded in both the realities of practice and the requirements of sound scholarship. It is important to identify the particular contribution intended here. The conceptual focus of the book is the role of the public administrator in an organizational setting; the central integrating ethical concept used in dealing with that role is responsibility. The central ethical process adopted for addressing ethical problems associated with administrative responsibility is a comprehensive design approach.

What Is Ethics?

*Ethics* is defined in various ways, some more technical and precise than others. The usual brief textbook or dictionary definitions define ethics as “the attempt to state and evaluate principles by which ethical problems may be solved” (Jones, Sontag, Becker, and Fogelin, 1969, p. 1), “the normative standards of conduct derived from the philosophical and religious traditions of society” (Means, 1970, p. 52), or “the task of careful reflection several steps removed from the actual conduct of men” concerning “the assumptions and presuppositions of the moral life” (Gustafson, 1965, p. 113). Preston (1996) becomes a bit more specific by suggesting that “ethics is concerned about what is right, fair, just, or good; about what we ought to do, not just about what is the case or what is most acceptable or expedient” (p. 16). Martin (1995) defines ethics as moral philosophy and stipulates that it includes four main goals or interests: clarification of moral concepts; critical evaluation of moral
claims focused on “testing their truth, justification, and adequacy” (pp. 7–8); constructing an inclusive perspective by elucidating the interconnections among moral ideas and values; and providing moral guidance through improving practical judgment.

Gibson Winter (1966) defines ethics more comprehensively by describing the functions it serves in the social world. As an active enterprise, he says, “Ethics seeks to clarify the logic and adequacy of the values that shape the world; it assesses the moral possibilities which are projected and betrayed in the social give-and-take” (p. 218). Anyone engaged in ethical reflection takes on the task of analyzing and evaluating the principles embodied in various alternatives for conduct and social order. Ethics is, according to Winter, “a science of human intentionality” (p. 219).

For our purposes in this book, ethics may be understood as the study of moral conduct and moral status. Ethics and morality are often used interchangeably, but here I will distinguish them. Morality assumes some accepted modes of behavior that are given by a religious tradition, a culture (including an organizational culture), a social class, a community, or a family. It involves expected courses of conduct that are rooted in both formal rules and informal norms. Morality includes such things as “decent young people do not engage in premarital sex,” “family comes first,” “one should not conspicuously display one’s wealth,” “guests in one’s home must always be treated with respect,” “never drive under the influence,” “a day’s pay requires a day’s work,” “follow the orders of those above you in the organization,” and similar expectations. Sometimes these are written out in codes of conduct or rules, but at other times they are assumed and taken for granted. Typically they are asserted by a tradition, culture, religion, community, organization, or family as simply what is right.

Ethics, then, is one step removed from action. It involves the examination and analysis of the logic, values, beliefs, and principles that are used to justify morality in its various forms. It considers what is meant by principles such as justice, veracity, or the public interest; their implications for conduct in particular situations; and how one might argue for one principle over another as determinative in a particular decision. Ethics takes what is given or prescribed and asks what is meant and why. So ethics as related to conduct is critical reflection on morality toward grounding moral
conduct in systematic reflection and reasoning. It is not without an affective element since ethical reflection often evokes emotive responses of comfort or discomfort, resolution or quandary, and affirmation or antagonism.

Ethics also deals with the moral status of entities such as families, organizations, communities, and societies. Here ethical reasoning is focused on how the characteristics associated with the good family, or the good organization, or the good society are grounded in certain principles, values, beliefs, and logical argument. Ethics weighs the adequacy of these attributes and analyzes how they are justified.

Ethics may be dealt with descriptively or normatively. Descriptively, ethics attempts to reveal underlying assumptions and how they are connected to conduct. Normatively, ethics attempts to construct viable and defensible arguments for particular courses of conduct as being better than others in specific situations. This book engages mainly in a descriptive approach to the ethical situation of public administrators and provides some analytical tools for arriving at normative judgments. It does not describe a particular public service ethic, which I have addressed in another book, *An Ethic of Citizenship for Public Administration* (1991). However, my approach to the normative ethics of the public administrative role is just one among several options under discussion currently.

Ethics may be viewed from either or both of two major orientations: deontological and teleological. Deontological approaches to ethics focus on one’s duty to certain ethical principles such as justice, freedom, or veracity without regard for the consequences of one’s actions. Teleological ethics, in contrast, involves a concern for the ends or consequences of one’s conduct. This is the position most notably associated with utilitarianism and its calculus of the greatest good for the greatest number. This book assumes that most of us undertake decisions using both of these perspectives most of the time. That is, we consider principles that are important to us in a concrete situation and then ask ourselves what the consequences of acting on those principles are likely to be. The decision-making model presented in the next chapter combines deontological and teleological orientations.

Doing ethics, then, involves thinking more systematically about the values and principles that are embedded in the choices we
otherwise would make on practical or political grounds alone. As we reflect on these implicit values, we ask ourselves how they are consistent with our duties and toward what ends and consequences they lead. Keeping in mind the obligations and goals of the roles we occupy, we seek to rank-order them for a particular ethical decision we confront in the course of carrying out a specific role.

The relationship between law and ethics often comes up in the discussion of specific cases. My answer is that law is the moral minimum. It is the minimum level of conduct that we as a society can agree to impose on all of us through the threat of force and sanctions. Ethical considerations are often involved in deliberations about proposed legislation, but once crystallized into law, the conduct prescribed is assumed to be backed up by the coercive power of government. However, from an ethicist’s point of view, law must always stand under the judgment of ethics. Sometimes laws may be deemed unjust and therefore unethical. Those who believe so may challenge those laws in the courts as inconsistent with the human rights guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution, or they may engage in civil disobedience even to the point of being arrested and going to jail.

Both kinds of challenges occurred during the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s. The NAACP engaged in litigation against unjust segregation laws in the American South. Martin Luther King Jr. and many others employed civil disobedience by sitting in at segregated facilities, refusing to sit in the back seats on buses, and demonstrating against segregated schools even when ordered by legal authorities not to do so. Sometimes laws need to be challenged on ethical grounds. In the long tradition of civil disobedience exemplified by Gandhi and King, the key proviso is that one must be willing to accept the consequences of one’s actions in order to demonstrate commitment to ethical principles over what are considered unjust laws. That is, one must be willing to suffer fines and imprisonment in order to evoke a response from the larger society to bring about change in the laws in question.

Responsibility and Role

The terms role and responsibility are peculiarly modern in connotation. Both suggest a worldview in which the power of tradition is broken and human beings are left to construct a world of their
own making. Roles must be devised and responsibility defined as ways of reestablishing obligations in our modern, pluralistic, technological society. Technology is applied not only to production but also to society itself.

Gibson Winter (1966, pp. 254–255) observed: “Responsibility is a relatively new term in the ethical vocabulary, appearing in the nineteenth century with a somewhat ambiguous meaning. The term evaluates action and attributes it to an agent; it does so in lieu of cosmic or natural structures of obligation. The historical awareness of the nineteenth century, the scientific and technological revolutions, and the collapse of metaphysical systems had undermined fixed notions of obligations. The term ‘responsibility’ was a way of filling this gap by defining the scope of accountability and obligation in contexts of law and common culture.”

Similarly, Richard McKeon’s study of the emergence of the term in Western thought reveals that responsibility first appeared in English and French in 1787. It was used initially in reference to the political institutions arising out of the American and French revolutions, but its use continued through the nineteenth century. When “constitutional government was vastly extended, in scope of operation and in spread among nations, as a result of contacts of cultures and peoples” (1957, p. 23), the concept of responsibility became increasingly significant as a way of defining a common set of values among people of divergent cultures and traditions.

The concept of role then becomes a convenient way to package expectations and obligations associated with the modern world. As we cease to view social functions as received intact from the past and instead to be manipulated and created anew, we take upon ourselves bounded obligation in the form of various roles. People exercise responsibility and are held responsible in society by accepting and carrying out an array of more or less well-defined roles: employee, parent, citizen, group member. The most problematic roles are those not clearly defined, usually because there is little agreement about the boundaries of responsibility associated with them. What does it mean to be a responsible parent in the first decade of the twenty-first century? Or a responsible spouse, responsible citizen, responsible politician, or responsible public administrator?

The problem is that although public administrators are responsible for certain duties (those that constitute the professional role),
they sometimes believe they are obligated to act otherwise. This is because administrators, along with everyone else in modern society, maintain an array of roles related to family, community, and society, each carrying a set of obligations and vested with certain personal interest. The quite common result is conflict among roles as these competing forces push and pull in opposite directions. The effects of these conflicts are compounded by the range of discretion administrators must exercise. Legislation frequently provides only broad language about its intent, leaving the specifics to administrators. Consequently, ethical standards and sensitivity are crucial to the responsible use of this discretion.

The Responsible Administrator

The responsible administrator is one who is responsible in the two senses discussed briefly above; the subject is treated more thoroughly in Chapter Four. Responsible administrators must be able to account for their conduct to relevant others such as supervisors, elected officials, the courts, and the citizenry, which means being able to explain and justify why specific actions they took resulted in particular consequences. They must also be able to act in ways that are consistent with their inner convictions as professional guardians of the public good. That is, being a responsible administrator includes both objective accountability for conduct and subjective congruence with one’s professional values. Ethics is the most fundamental way in which one satisfies both kinds of responsibility. Responsible administrators must be ethically sophisticated enough to reason with others about how their conduct serves the public interest and have sufficient clarity about their own professional ethical commitments to maintain integrity and a sense of self-esteem.

What, then, is the difference between an ethical administrator and a responsible administrator? A public administrator who has been properly socialized may be able to act in accordance with the common good some or even most of the time, thus being an ethical administrator some or most of the time, but not be able to account for his or her conduct with reasons when questioned or challenged, and perhaps not even be able to understand in a self-conscious way why he or she acted in a particular way. Understanding one’s motivations and being able to explain and justify