

A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO COMBATING CORRUPTION

**PROF. SS SANGWENI,
CHAIRPERSON, PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION,
SOUTH AFRICA**

1. Introduction

South Africa has entered a new phase in its continuing campaign against corruption in the public and all other sectors of society. From former president Mandela's call to create an "RDP of the soul," to President Mbeki's "commitment of our government to honest, transparent and accountable governance," to the creation of a wide range of sector-specific codes of conduct and codes of ethics, we see a widening and deepening of South Africa's commitment to rebuilding a strong ethics culture.

Both our own experience and available research show us how to utilise these codes in structures to build a civil and organisational culture of common values and operational compliance. For one thing we are more than ever mindful that codes can be rendered ineffective either because they are poorly designed and/or badly implemented. The emphasis is therefore shifting to integration of common values into daily life and individual decisions, where individual judgement can be monitored and supported by an ethics-based civil culture. The most critical element of an emerging ethics infrastructure must be the culture and ethos in government and civil society that should permeate everyday work. This can be built through communication and training, and most importantly, through a process of continual dialogue on ethical issues. In the absence of an overarching moral ethos, even the best rules, systems, procedures and institutions will not be able to curb corruption and unethical behaviour.

All sectors in South Africa actively participate in a shared vision of an integrated, proactive approach to fighting corruption and many attended the National Anti-Corruption Summit held in Parliament during April this year. It is their ideas and actions, their attempts to build an effective ethics and anti-corruption infrastructure that is likely to prove most effective in our country.

As the global fight against corruption gathers pace, one is reminded of Durkheim's old concept of 'anomie' which holds that in modern societies traditional norms and standards become undermined, without being replaced by new ones. In these circumstances people feel disoriented, anxious and prone to deviant behaviour. People quite often deviate from the rules they are expected to follow, thus depriving the social world of its orderly and predictable character. In spite of its deficiencies the theory of 'anomie' succeeds in sensitising one to the conditions in which many "normal" people choose to engage in acts of corruption.

The coming together therefore, of delegates representing the community of nations to the 9th International Anti-Corruption Conference, is a conscious effort to ensure revival of universally accepted norms and values, reverse the effects of 'anomie' and rejuvenate effective integrity strategies to fight corruption. As participants in the conference are drawn from backgrounds and circumstances that differ greatly from one another, the focus should be on similar ethical challenges and universal principles of good governance whose application will take political, economic and cultural circumstances into account. The logical benefits of this conference include a broadening of perspectives gained from exposure to the varying experiences and knowledge of participants from many countries. The East Asian crises generally, and the subsequent political turmoil in Malaysia and Indonesia, have underlined the

importance of “good governance” to global economic stability. This fact makes the global effort to fight corruption all the more relevant.

It is very tempting to link the problem of corruption to the lack of integrity systems and thus the moral erosion of societies. We need to interrogate this position and determine ways in which public officials can rededicate themselves to developing and maintaining the highest standards of honesty in their jurisdictions and organisations. Much of the focus should be on the organisational integrity approach that has been found useful and successful in practice. Its four-part solution or proposal presents frameworks and procedures that can be used to restructure and reorganise society at large to lower corrupt incentives.

2. The Organisational Integrity approach

Dr. Quah, a political scientist from the National University of Singapore (TI Source Book, 99/08/31) asserts that “The acid test of a government’s sincerity in wiping out bureaucratic corruption hinges not only on the formulation of anti-corruption measures. Rather its credibility lies in the actual implementation of such measures and their effects on the behaviour of civil servants and the society at large.” For this reason, the organisational integrity approach is based on how ethical values can underlie everything an organisation does or any system, procedure or structure it puts in place. As such, the following areas are covered in some detail within the South African context:

- Firstly, the identification of an organisation’s core values and their relation to the everyday working practice.
- Second, process is to develop leadership, communication channels and an organisational vision to support and nurture these values within the organisation.
- Thirdly, the strategies, structures, systems, policies, procedures, skills and resources should be tailored to support these ethical values. All relations with the external environment should also reflect these ethical values.
- In the fourth place, a culture of shared responsibility should result. Those who display this responsibility should be rewarded and those who don’t should be subjected to a further ethics-training programme.

Let us look at a deeper development and practicality of the above principles.

2.1 Identifying core values and engendering the values of the Code of Conduct at the workplace:

Organisational integrity implies that moral values are likely to be engendered in an organisation if all employees understand the importance of ethical behaviour and have ownership of a Code of Conduct. It is only through shared values that a sense of belonging can be created at the workplace, whether in the public service, or the private sector or among the non-governmental environments. The impact of conducive working conditions on decreasing corrupt activities cannot be denied. This sense of belonging can act as a fertile ground for ensuring public duty and preventing unethical behaviour.

This is a long-term process that requires strategic planning and commitment. It is time we start to put our money where our mouth is. Training on the moral values in the workplace should be an on-going process. It should be part of recruitment, training sessions and performance appraisals. The message that

should be sent is that one can only work in the public service, private sector and non-governmental environments if one adheres to moral values.

Training on moral values should not be restricted to the workplace. It is no use to wait until it is too late. The moral erosion of our society has penetrated the very core of our homes, families, schools and other civil institutions. We, therefore, have to invest in the moral development of our school children and university students.

In this context it is worth noting the resolutions of the National Anti-Corruption Summit where it was resolved that all sectors should develop and adopt sector-specific codes of conduct. Earlier, the South African NGO Coalition had taken the initiative to develop a code that would set NGOs “a standard which is far higher than the minimum requirements of the law”. This Code of Ethics was formally adopted in September 1997 and provided a valiant challenge to other sectors to identify their core values around issues of governance, accountability and management. Equally vigilant in responding to what they described as “a deep moral crisis,” the country’s religious leaders called a Moral Summit to meet in October 1998 where a Code of Conduct for persons in leadership positions and a humanitarian ethics pledge (ubuntu) was adopted by the likes of President Nelson Mandela.

The Code of Conduct for the Public Service had of course become part of the regulations for every public servant by June 1997 and has been the subject of an ethics promotional campaign by the Public Service Commission. All the initiatives mentioned above collectively bear bold testimony to a definite attempt by a nation to position its experience of democracy within a broader moral framework. The critical values of accountability, transparency and good governance are hopefully exerting an impinging concern upon the taste for responsible freedom.

2.2 Vision, leadership and communication:

The ethics drive at the workplace will only succeed if there exists the will and management commitment towards the process. Thus our Constitution puts a high premium on ethical conduct (in Sections 96, 136 and 195) expected of all national, provincial and other public officials.

In the government environment for instance, both the elected officials as well as the bureaucrats, must buy into the drive towards ethics in the public service. Similarly the business sector has initiated its best practice model through the King Report where the need for ethics management is highlighted. Public confidence must be restored by each and every leader “walking the talk”. To support leaders in this process training ought to be provided regarding the following:

- Values must be the basis of the strategic planning process driven by management. The value of aligning the vision with the core values identified by the organisation itself must be indicated to managers. Ethics must not be sidelined as something separate from daily business.
- The value of ethics in an organisation needs to be articulated and various success stories disseminated. The leaders themselves must be taught to act as role models and mentors.
- Leaders must be accountable and fair in their actions and decisions. Transparency and accountability in all managerial decisions must be entrenched.

- Communication systems internally and externally must be effectively in place. Employees should be provided with all necessary information and guidance on ethical issues.
- Easy access to grievance channels and whistleblowing systems should be workable, providing adequate protection to whistleblowers and visible evidence that reported cases are acted on.

2.3 Systematic reform of structures, systems, policies and procedures, skills and resources should be adequate:

Insufficient resources and skills and inefficient systems, policies and procedures often lead to opportunities for corruption. Important core values such as accountability and transparency cannot operate in an environment where too little resources and too few skills must cope with huge problems. The following areas will need attention:

- Policies and procedures should reflect the organisation's values and vision. Structures should emphasise personal accountability and shared responsibility rather than mere adherence to rules. Teamwork should be encouraged in order to increase accountability. Opportunities for cross-functional communication, co-operation and information sharing must be established.
- All resources must be used fairly and impartially and be provided with a working environment conducive to high quality work.
- Unnecessary hierarchies must be avoided and leaders must commit themselves structurally to open communication channels. For instance, structures which allow the public service to learn from its external environment must be created such that this includes interaction with NGOs, community organisations, religious communities, etc.
- Internal and external reporting systems, disciplinary procedures and reward systems must be structured in such a way as to support the engendering of values. These systems could easily function as mere rules and regulations with certain loopholes and unless these are closed, ethics will be the loser.

This legalist way of dealing with systems will not stop corruption in the workplace, but will rather lead to target hardening or displacement. Rules, disciplinary codes, procedures and reporting systems, etc. must rather portray those values that the organisation regards as important. They should indicate what should be aspired to and what should be avoided, state clearly what kind of behaviour will be punished and what will be rewarded. Yet, their formulation and application should always fit into the aspirational approach of engendering certain values within the organisation.

2.4 Culture of shared responsibility:

Integrity depends on the extent to which the ethical standards and behaviour of individuals support the moral values the organisation stands for. Individuals must be empowered and trusted to serve the public good.

This can only be realised if a culture of shared responsibility is created. A culture of shared responsibility should be effected at both national and sectoral levels.

2.4.1 National Culture of shared responsibility:

- Public support for moral decision-making should be enlisted in order to create a national culture of shared responsibility.
- This implies that consultation should take place on various levels of society.
- Free and fair functioning of the media should be guaranteed.

2.4.2 Workplace Culture of shared responsibility:

- All employees must have a sense ownership of all decisions and actions within the organisation.
- The core values underlying the Code of Conduct must permeate all their decisions and actions.
- They must be prepared to blow the whistle on unethical behaviour. Protection of “whistleblowers” should be an important priority.

3. THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

To what extent has the organisational integrity approach informed the South African experience? Let me elaborate.

Barely three years into a new political dispensation, South Africans from across all sectors of society have been involved in developing a national ethics framework in the context of a national campaign against corruption. This National Anti-Corruption Initiative initially involved the Department of Justice and the Public Service Commission (PSC) organising the Public Sector Anti-Corruption Conference in Parliament, Cape Town, from 10 - 11 November 1998. This was followed by the National Anti-Corruption Summit which was held from 14 - 15 April 1999 where all relevant stakeholders from the public, private and the non-governmental sectors deliberated on measures for all South Africans “to work towards a higher moral purpose”.

The Summit firmly resolved that corruption was a “blight on society” that required a national integrity strategy to bring it under control. It should be noted that this has also been a recurring theme in speeches by both President Mbeki and former President Nelson Mandela. The collapse of the moral order in our society is not reminiscent of a lax or complacent view of the engulfing crisis of moral degradation. On the contrary the national ethics initiative has been at work and its mustard seed origins are intended to bear fruit.

Organised business has been quietly meeting since the Summit in April 1999 mentioned above and a generic Code of Conduct is being proffered for adoption with amendments being made specific to the nature of the business operation. The Code applicable for the Public Service was developed earlier and is currently being promoted whereby issues such as fraud, bribery, financial management and control, forensic audit and professional ethics are being addressed across the country.

In this latter case participants come from both business and government since much of corruption usually involves both parties. National departments and provinces are being subjected to an ethics audit

as reports are being solicited by the Public Service.

Our paralysis arises more from the crippling inertia of fragmentation than the lack of commitment. Elements of the envisaged national strategy include the formation of a national ethics co-ordinating structure to combat and prevent corruption, development of ethics training modules for schools and colleges, establishment of telephone hotlines to report unethical behaviour, blacklisting of professionals found guilty of corruption, a sustained media campaign to raise awareness on ethical issues, and the evolution of a culture of zero tolerance towards immoral behaviour. None of these efforts in themselves will eliminate the ethical deficit that we all acknowledge exists but a fresh approach with a 'new' government at the helm in partnership with the people might just be a sign of the times.

Partnerships are a way not only to engage the public but also fellow artisans in all parts of the world who share the vision of global integrity in governance for the next millennium. It should be noted that South Africa is a relative newcomer on the international stage, not least in developing its own programme of action to fight corruption. Through the two national anticorruption conferences mentioned earlier and other ethics consultations that take place on an ongoing basis, the Public Service Commission has recognised the need for informed debate and discussion to guide the national malaise sweeping the nation. Ultimately the challenge is to contribute meaningfully to the understanding and curbing of a very vexing problem that will hopefully be ethically managed in both the short and long terms.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is possible to minimise corruption if there is a strong political will. Needless to say, the situation becomes untenable if such political will is lacking as political leaders; business leaders, civic bodies, non-governmental bodies and senior public servants pay only lip service to implementing anti-corruption strategies. Furthermore, any anti-corruption effort needs to be monitored to ensure that progress is being made. A better form of measurement is not mere statistics but the opinions of the people themselves. Corruption directly affects their daily lives. They have strongly held views on its impact on the services that they are entitled to receive. Polling the public regularly could measure progress towards the eventual eradication of corruption in all of its forms.