

The Responsible Administrator Has The Ethics Edge

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Terry L. Cooper, *The Responsible Administrator: An Approach to Ethics for the Administrative Role*, 4th edition (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1998). 304 pp., \$27.95 hard.

Evan M. Berman, Jonathan P. West, Stephen J. Bonczek, eds., *The Ethics Edge*, (International City/County Management Association, 1998). 246 pp., \$24.95 paper.

The title of this review is not a feeble attempt at humor, but rather summarizes the conclusion one reaches after reading both books. Each informs the other as it pertains to the complex field of public administration ethics. This is another way of saying to academics and practitioners alike that both books are worth having or, more importantly, reading ... but for different reasons. That said, a separate consideration of each book follows, after which they will be reflected upon in tandem.

The Responsible Administrator

Cooper's *The Responsible Administrator* was first published in 1982, the year that *Jane Fonda's Workout Book* was the number one non-fiction best-seller in the United States (McDowell 1983). Over 16 years later, Fonda's book is long out of print, perhaps the victim of changing interests or physical fitness fads. Meanwhile, editions of Cooper's work remain in use, testimony to their continued relevance and applicability in a time when administrative management con-

cerns have acquired a "flavor of the month" quality. Earlier editions have been referred to as "seminal" (Burke 1997) and cited in such well-received works as Frederickson's *The Spirit of Public Administration* (1997) or Van Wart's *Changing Public Sector Values* (1998). At the same time, as a rather sharp exchange in *Public Administration Review* indicated (Bruce 1992a, 1992b; Cooper 1992), one could read the third edition and feel it did not present an all encompassing exposition of the antecedents for responsible, ethical public administration.

In the author's own words, that was, and is in the new edition, by design. The same sentence appears in the 1990 (xvi) and 1998 (xxi) prefaces: "Again, the ultimate purpose of *The Responsible Administrator* is to illuminate the ethical situation of the public administrator and cultivate imaginative reflection about it—not to prescribe a particular set of public service values." In this statement the value of the book, most particularly to the practitioner, can be found. In fact, it does not merely "cultivate imaginative reflection" about ethics, it demands it. Whether or not one wishes to embrace

Cooper's individual ethical decision-making model (20) is really not the issue. What is important is that thoughtful consideration be given to one's own approach to ethics in the administrative role. The book does not list proverbs of administrative ethics to blindly follow; rather, it effectively challenges the reader to think about thinking about ethics.

The first chapter establishes, especially for those who have not seen the earlier editions, that this is an imminently readable book. This is critical knowledge for those who fear that books about ethics are dry, Byzantine treatises filled with references to long dead philosophers. Cooper does not lose sight that this book, while clearly suitable for academic use, is written to benefit administrators struggling to deal with the ethical conundrums of day-to-day life. The short ethical problems he presents (e.g., 3–6) are useful not just for classroom discussion, but also to establish the author's understanding of problems that administrators in the field actually face. The decision-making model presented (20) as a means for thinking about these and other ethical problems is neither so

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narrow as to permit the reader to use it as a “plug and chug” formula nor so broad as to make it a pointless exercise in chart making.

Following chapter 1, the book is divided into two parts. Part One addresses the individual, Part Two the organization. In each part, thought provoking case studies are meshed into the text, giving the reader an opportunity to consider Cooper’s arguments in light of actual or possible scenarios.

Cooper, in a change from the third edition, opens chapter 2 with a discussion of the tension between the concepts of modernity and postmodernity. Given the questions and uncertainty that the on-going social construction of ethics can create, it is apparent that this subject could have been discussed more fully. That said, the issue is sufficiently addressed to adequately highlight an issue that administrators increasingly must be aware of in order to incorporate it into their ethical considerations.

Part One, comprised of three chapters, deals with important issues and concepts such as the political nature of public administration (40–6), individual responsibility driven by external and internal obligations (66–84), and the “tension between public and private interests and quandaries over how to manage them” (115). While these may seem familiar themes to some, this section of the book serves to bring them together with well-detailed case studies for thoughtful consideration. For the experienced administrator or academic, as well as the novice or student, there is a coherent and evocative development of the nuanced dilemmas facing the public administrator which lends itself to reflection and discussion.

Part Two, also three chapters in length, deals with the ethical environment of public organizations. The opening chapter is a cogent exposition of the continued debate between the efficacy of external (laws and codes) versus internal (value laden) ethical

controls (132–4) with subsequent development of the pros and cons of each. Cooper emphasizes the point that there is a worrisome tendency to dichotomize this discussion (134). This creates “winner take all” arguments that make it difficult to effectively integrate the use of both control methodologies either in terms of abstract discussions or workplace realities. He places responsibility upon the administrator to create a workable, consistent balance between the types of control (163).

Chapter 6 reminds (or informs) the reader of some of the realities of organization life. There will be a conflict between internal and external controls. The ethical conduct of administrators is composed of and bounded by individual attributes, organizational structure, organizational culture, and societal expectations (169). Cooper discusses the essence of each of these, citing relevant sources. In establishing these four components, he sets the stage for his final chapter. First, however, Cooper discusses a matter of key concern to any ethical responsible administrator. What does one do when one’s superiors or entire organization is unethical?

One cannot lose sight of these major impediments to being and acting ethically. One’s personal integrity and good intentions can fail, if for no other reason than exhaustion, when faced with unrelenting pressure from above or a pervasively unethical work environment. Chapter 7 gives the reader the opportunity to think about a subject the avoidance of which would have vitiated any practical discussion of administrative ethics. In it, Cooper espouses the concept of “individual autonomy,” which requires “a conscious effort to continuously cultivate self-awareness of the dynamic relationship between the interest of the self and the demands of the role, [without which] laws and organizational safeguards are likely to be of no avail” (243).

This is clearly a difficult undertaking, and Cooper does not hide that difficulty in his discussion. This chapter, supported by portions of Part One, points the reader in the direction of reflective moral development but can leave one looking for more guidance. Given the scope of the subject material being covered, this is entirely understandable. One who wishes to go farther in this specific area should read Badaracco’s *Defining Moments* (1997), which deals expressly with this kind of ethical self-development.

The concluding chapter of the book discusses a model of ethical, responsible administrative action based on the issues and concepts the author has presented. It opens with the image of the responsible administrator as “a juggler dealing with a multitude of competing obligations and interests” (244). This is an image with which both academics and practitioners can readily identify. In proffering a model of responsible administration (248–9), Cooper once again forces consideration of just how complex a juggling act the responsible administrator must be prepared to perform. The model lays out more than his components of responsible conduct and individual ethical autonomy. It also identifies the—at times conflicting, at times complementary—actions they engender. This model does not constitute a laundry list of do’s and don’ts. Without having read the entire book and considering the points that Cooper has developed, the model cannot be appreciated. As was the case with the earlier discussed ethical decision-making model, the reader need not embrace this model unreservedly and cannot use it as a “fill in the blank” approach to responsible administration. Again, Cooper forces the reader to see, in a clear and concise manner, the thoughtful consideration that is necessary to act ethically and responsibly, this time on a broader administrative scale.

It is understandable why this book is in its fourth edition. It poses ques-

tions, discusses problems, and evokes debates that current administrators must be as aware of now as when the book was first published. It must be noted that the latest edition is not merely a reprint of the last. At least five references have been dropped that were used in the third edition, while about fifty-six have been added. That said, there are occasional items that could have been updated in the editorial process. For example, the case study regarding the relationship between two military officers and an enlisted person (92–7), which appeared also in the 1990 edition (85–90), overlooks the well-publicized increased sensitivity regarding fraternization (see Van Biema 1997). This would complicate (or simplify) the courses of action posited as being available to a first lieutenant who has been placed in an awkward position. This is a minor quibble at most, however. The book's continued usefulness and value as a textbook and reference source is unquestioned.

The Ethics Edge

The second book to be considered, *The Ethics Edge*, differs in style of authorship and form from *The Responsible Administrator*. It is, however, no less worthy of attention.

Unlike Cooper's book, *The Ethics Edge* is a collection of articles by various authors with connections to administrative ethics in general, many to public administration ethics specifically. A publication of the International City/County Management Association (ICMA), it is fittingly included in that organization's "Practical Management Series" of books. This is a book that administrators will find useful as a source for specific ethical information regarding techniques and results. Because, as its editors point out (4), all of its 20 articles were written since 1990 (most after 1994), it is also a valuable tool for the academic either in the classroom or for research.

This is a more staccato book than Cooper's. Although there is a clear encouragement to act ethically in *The Responsible Administrator*, the shorter articles in *The Ethics Edge* and the diverse range of subjects they cover lend more immediacy to what they discuss. This is in keeping with the intent of editors Berman, West, and Bonczek, who state that they wanted to produce a volume that one could read either "selectively or sequentially" (6). The articles in the book are grouped into three parts; Part One outlines the foundations of ethics, Part Two discusses the implementation of ethics, and Part Three showcases some of the current issues or frontiers in public administration ethics.

In dealing with the foundations of ethics, the authors chose to open with excerpts from Michael Josephson on the components of character, Stephen L. Carter on the difference between simple honesty and true integrity, and Stephen Covey on ethical principles. These excerpts are not specifically focussed on public administration ethics, but provide a good, albeit somewhat aphoristic, overview of how one might undertake to act ethically. They are easy to read and provide useful insights to consider.

A hard truth of ethics, that "tough ethical dilemmas, it may be argued, involve decisions of a right- vs.-right nature," (38) is well presented by Patricia L. Brousseau in her article. This subject is correctly placed in the book's section on foundations. Brousseau does an excellent job of moving from the "easier" task of creating ethical decision-making models to the consideration of what one does when faced with multiple "right" answers based on the public administrator's conflicting responsibilities. Cooper also discusses this problem in his book, but Brousseau's briefer treatment is particularly useful for the harried administrator looking for some assurance and guidance when first faced with this type of dilemma.

Concluding Part One is an excerpt from Thompson's excellent article in the May/June 1992 issue of *Public Administration Review* on the paradoxes inherent in government ethics. It provides a wonderful answer to anyone who has asked why ethics in government is so important: "Ethics may be only a means to an end, but it is a necessary means to an end. Government ethics provides the preconditions for the making of good public policy. In this sense, it is more important than any single policy because all policies depend on it" (48).

Thompson also discusses quickly and clearly the important difference between private ethics, with its emphasis on personal relations, and public ethics, which often dwell on legal requirements. The problems associated with public officials and the appearance of impropriety are also explored.

Part Two of the book contains eight works primarily concerned with, for want of a better term, "nuts and bolts" issues. Seven of the titles use terms such as "institutionalizing," "creating," "achieving," "enforcing," "decision-making," "strategies and tactics," and "the first step." Only one article's title does not have a word or phrase that fits into this list. However, Lloyd A. Rowe and Richard W. Hug's work deals with the perceptions of 605 ICMA member municipal managers regarding the efficacy of the ICMA Code of Ethics. As such, it is an analysis of whether a specific technique, an implemented code of ethics, is perceived by those who utilize it to have a substantive salutary impact. In this case, the study indicates it is.

The seven "how to" articles each address areas of practitioner as well as academic interest. There are occasional overlaps in the concepts or techniques covered, but this should be expected given the format of the book.

In a discussion of institutionalizing ethics in government, Gary B. Brumback draws practical distinctions between legal and ethical behaviors.

Using data collected from attendees of the 1989 ASPA Conference, he concisely discusses some of the approaches most frequently cited as ways to institutionalize ethics. These include using ethics screening techniques during hiring, including ethics in the performance appraisal process, conducting ethics training, and accomplishing periodic ethics audits. Aspects of these largely instrumental techniques recur throughout the remaining articles in Part Two.

Stephen J. Bonczek's article on creating ethical environments carries on some of Brumback's themes, primarily training. It contains guidelines and suggestions that would be of use to the practitioner who is considering starting an ethics training program or evaluating one already in existence. For the academic, it provides a compact exposition of key elements found in successful workplace ethics training programs. Immediately following this, Montgomery Van Wart's article on assessment includes a discussion on the need for ethics audits. Bonczek's previous prescription of an ethical climate survey prior to training (73–5) bolsters his argument. Van Wart also presents a functional example of an "ethics audit perpetual assessment" (87) and cites Carol W. Lewis' work in this area. Readers wanting to find another example of an ethics audit would be well served to look at pages 199–202 of her *The Ethics Challenge in Public Service: A Problem Solving Guide* (1991).

Stephen Bonczek and Donald Menzel then refute eight of what they identify as "false assumptions" that impede the ability to achieve an ethical workplace. These include preconceived notions about the ineffectiveness of discussing ethics in the workplace, the limited need for ethics training, and the ability to achieve quickly and easily the goal of an ethical workplace. For those familiar with the issues involved, the points made may seem obvious. The key, however,

is to remember that Bonczek and Menzel's list represents exactly the kind of FAQ (frequently asked question) list that administrators newly attuned to this area of interest might have. At the same time, it is a quick introduction for the student to some deep-seeded misconceptions about trying to apply ethics to the workplace. Anita Cava, Jonathan P. West, and Evan M. Berman's article deals briefly with another portion of the ethical conundrum, the difference between using formal (code-based) and informal (principle-based) means for ethical decision making. This is reminiscent of Cooper's discussion of the Friedrich–Finer debate. Cava, West, and Berman leave the reader with the key understanding that no single approach provides the means to make effective ethical decisions.

Carol Lewis then provides, in an excerpt from her 1991 book, a case study-based consideration of a public personnel director's ethical dilemma. Even if one chose not to use her checklist (124), as a means of reaching an ethical decision, one might use her development of the elements of the list as a springboard for discussion and further thought on the subject.

The final article in Part Two broaches the subject of the enforcement of administrative ethics. Mark W. Huddleston and Joseph C. Sands provide another perspective on the problem of achieving ethics in the workplace. Among other things, the value of inspectors general, ombudsmen, and special commissions is examined in the article. Based on the term "enforcement" appearing in the title, one might assume that the article deals only with formal means of attaining ethical conduct. However, Huddleston and Sands make the same assertion that Cooper makes: Codes, laws, and ethics police are not sufficient; organizational culture must be part of the concept of ethical enforcement. This idea is echoed by many of the other authors in *The Ethics Edge*.

If there is a problem with Part Two, it comes from the stated format of the book. While the academic may use the entire book in a classroom setting, the practitioner may be tempted to use one particular article to find a "cookbook" solution to a specific problem. While this cannot have been the editors' intent, it must be noted as a possibility that could arise from workplace pressures (more on this in the conclusion of this review).

Part Three of *The Ethics Edge* is of particular significance because the editors used it to identify emerging areas of ethical concern (8). This creates the risk this part could become the most quickly dated. However, were the editors to come out with subsequent editions, updating Part Three would serve to highlight changes in the field of public administration ethics.

The editors, by the articles they included, marked the following seven areas for particular attention:

- *Professionalism* – James S. Bowman comments that, "Managers need not only the technical ability to analyze problems but also the capacity to grasp those problems in a manner consistent with professional principles of role responsibility and personal integrity. Ethics comes with the territory" (161–2).
- *Public Entrepreneurship* – Steven Cohen and William Eimicke look for ethical lessons in the financial troubles of Orange County, California; the reinvention experience of Visalia, California; and the privatization of Indianapolis, Indiana's water treatment system. They "conclude that even the most creative public officials are not fully equipped to determine the degree of risk and innovation that is ethical and responsible" (176).
- *Politically Motivated Privatization* – A case study of the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) during the Reagan administration by Peter Kobrak highlights the ethical quagmire that privati-

zation can lead to when accomplished by public officials seeking personal or political gain. “High-echelon line executives from every agency involved in public/private enterprises must sponsor, and themselves participate in, training sessions to increase the likelihood that ... institutional ethical concerns will become part of the administrative agency’s culture” (190).

- *Ethics and the Cyber-Workplace* – Here is an area that will probably generate many studies in the future. Donald Menzel examined the Internet acceptable use (IAU) policies on 60 state/local government Websites. He identifies three types of policy approaches; generic (use of existing rules on information technology), formalistic (rule oriented), and guidelines (nonpunitive do’s and don’ts). Regarding the ethical impact, “it might be suggested that if the prevailing values of an organization’s ethical environment are weak, Web access and usage will merely reinforce, not change, that environment” (202).
- *Public Cynicism* – Evan M. Berman discusses the “pervasive beliefs that government policies and public officials are corrupt, inept, or out to take advantage of citizens” (206). He suggests that public administrators must increase the level of trust the public accords to them. Public administrators must not only be competent and trustworthy, they must communicate these attributes to the public.
- *Community Building* – This concept refers to encouraging citizens to feel that they “own” their neighborhoods and to work toward their continued sustainability in partnership with the government. To make such undertakings successful, Evan M. Berman and Stephen J. Bonczek state that, “Ethics are important both because they help maintain strategic focus and direction and because government leaders must be viewed as

credible, sincere, and competent by others in their community” (217).

- *Ethics Issues for Local Government Managers* – Elizabeth K. Kellar, deputy director for ICMA, addresses the ethics issues most frequently discussed by the organization’s membership. These include political activity, employment agreements, ethical standards enforcement and censure, and ethics education. Regarding the advice ICMA gives its members, she says, “Those outside the profession might see some of ICMA’s advice as overly cautious. What ICMA tells its members is that even if an action is legal, it may not be ethical” (236). ICMA’s Code of Ethics is the basis for much of the guidance given. It is reproduced in *The Ethics Edge* on pages 237–41.

Taken together, the articles in Part Three indicate the range of ethical issues now facing public administrators. For the academic, they represent fields of important study; for the practitioner, the realities of administrative life. They come at the end of a book that tries hard to educate its readers about a large variety of concepts and problems. This is a largely successful effort that is only, and logically, hindered by the fact that it cannot cover in depth each issue it raises.

Different, But Complementary

In considering *The Responsible Administrator* and *The Ethics Edge* together, one sees they are complementary. Each addresses an area where the other is less robust.

Berman, West, and Bonczek furnish the reader with a collection of current literature that contain phrases and words like “Web site” or “reinvention.” Some of its value is then, by design, ephemeral. This is not a bad thing. *The Ethics Edge* should be on the bookshelf behind the administrator’s desk for quick reference and

on the freshly printed syllabus for this semester’s MPA, PhD, or DPA course. A well-stocked toolbox with an excellent set of instructions and reference material, it provides checklists, rules of thumb, and statistical analyses of survey data. Moreover, it offers some meaningful insight into “why?”

Its shortcomings are related to its strengths. As noted before, *The Ethics Edge* can give the appearance of being a “cookbook” of solutions. Do you need to make an ethical decision? Just check page 124. This is not a problem created by the book’s editors. They offer us the means and the reasons to thoughtfully consider the book’s contents (6). Rather, the problem is one of our own making. As Cooper points out: “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?’” (xi). *The Responsible Administrator* acts to slow the rush to find the “how to” inherent in *The Ethics Edge*. In so doing, it serves as an excellent complementary text.

However, unlike *The Ethics Edge*, *The Responsible Administrator* does not offer the luxury of dropping in and out of it where one chooses. Characterized by its author as “largely descriptive and analytical” (xxi), it should not be read in short bursts. This book should reside behind the administrator’s desk in the spot reserved for books to be read when there is more time. It should also be on the student’s syllabus, but it should not be read hurriedly before class. To not examine this book carefully lessens its value and obviates the author’s intent. Cooper wants us to consider the role of the public administrator who must responsibly address ethical problems by means of a “comprehensive design approach” (xvi). This process should be given time.

Yet, Cooper is correct about our preoccupation with action. In fact, ethical administration demands ethi-

cal action. This is a dynamic process. *The Ethics Edge* transmits this urgency in a manner *The Responsible Administrator* does not. It: “highlights contemporary challenges and issues that face today’s manager as he or she seeks to build and maintain an ethical climate in a public sector setting ... ethics in government is not a new topic, the types of ethical challenges confronting managers as we enter the next millennium are different” (9). By its forward-looking orientation and impetus toward direct action *The Ethics Edge* energizes the processes discussed in *The Responsible Administrator*.

Examining these two books together—one a long respected volume in the academic field, the other produced under the auspices of a strongly practitioner-oriented organization—reveals again one of the basic truths in the field of public administration: It is through a combination of perspectives that we can best meet the challenges the future holds.

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