Enhancing an Ethical Culture in Government Departments through Purpose-Driven Leadership for Delivering Improved Service to the Public: The Case of South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that unethical behavior in the public service has great impact on the quality of service delivery to the public and that through an ethical and purpose-driven leadership becomes the driving force in delivering what is to be achieved. The fundamental purpose of creating government departments is to provide satisfactory services to general public. An ethical culture underpinning purpose-driven leadership is viewed as an effective approach that will promote the broader interests of society in respect of service delivery to public. A review of literature and reports by the Public Service Commission (PSC) and the media suggest that quality public service delivery has been badly affected due to lack of ethical culture within a purpose driven leadership. Public leaders must therefore use the organizational purpose as a frame of reference in the execution of their responsibilities so that public needs can be best achieved, without compromising ethical behavior. By adhering to the purpose, the principles of public service delivery beyond personal aspirations and ambitions can be prioritized.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The public service is the primary delivery arm of a democratic state; it should provide effective and efficient public services, which is expected to be responsive to the needs of the people. Such an expectation is often dependant on leaders’ commitment to maintaining acceptable standard of service delivery to the people. Such a commitment can be traced by recognizing the basic purpose of dividing the public functions amongst

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government departments, which should be the directed force underlying the behavior of all public leaders. Leaders adopting such an approach can influence others to follow their steps for attainment of a clearly understood and well-communicated purpose. A shared vision, therefore, results in ethical behavior guided by purpose-directed leadership. The absence of delivery oriented leadership affects public service credibility, as evident in many government departments. Unethical behavior has a negative impact on effective and efficient service delivery.

This study deals with the importance of ethics to face the problems being faced by the South African countries. It is the general perception of the public that democracy is deteriorating for the collective good in exchange for pre-occupation with personal advancement and enrichment, due to lack of ethical culture in the government departments. The Moral Regeneration Movement and the Anti-corruption Co-coordinating Committee, which were created in the Department of Public Service and Administration with the purpose to address ethical issues, suffered lack of coordinated approach for sustainable implementation to remove the discrepancies in satisfactory public service delivery. In this article the role of leadership has also been discussed in relation to public service delivery. This study is based on the systematic literature review.

Organization of the remaining paper is as follows: section -2 is about the impact of altruism on leadership; section 3 is about egoism and leadership; section-4 deals with purpose of Public Institutions; section -5 is about Leadership and service delivery; section-6 highlights the challenges facing ethical practices; section - 7 give the details about the Ethics and purpose driven leadership; section; section-8 is about pre-conditions for purpose driven leadership; section -8 is about personal and public service ethics. It considers the rationale for purpose-directed leadership in perpetuating an ethical culture for improved service delivery. Finally section - 10 gives the concluding remarks.

2. ALTRUISM AND LEADERSHIP

Leaders in the public service are obligated to pursue the goals of their institutions through efficiently effective behavior. Public leaders must prioritize the needs and expectations of the public, without contradicting the principles of ethical behavior.

It is the duty of every public leader to protect and promote public interest. In doing so, they must ensure that there are no impediments, like unethical behavior, to achieving a culture of quality service delivery. It becomes imperative for such leaders to set aside personal interests in favor of leadership approach that prioritizes the welfare of the wider society. In the realm of ethics, the utilitarian approach of doing the greatest good for the greatest number of reigns. In this regard, Melrose (1995:128) mentions the leader as a servant, who gives up personal power to benefit everyone. The leader as a servant can be considered an altruist, since his mission is to enrich lives and promote opportunities for institutional success.

Altruistic leaders respect laws to satisfy public needs. They accept responsibility and accountability in serving the broader interests of the public. Satisfying public needs are guided by integrity and work ethics. It can be argued that leaders, who espouse such principles, can create an organizational culture committed to achieving its purpose. Such leaders can be associated with a “passion of vision” characterized by a principle based approach which clarifies purpose, gives direction and empowers them to perform beyond their resources (Covey 1999:105). Leadership within the South African Revenue Service exemplifies this.

Altruistic leadership can have a transformational influence on the entire organization by creating a sense of common direction where self-centered interests are not pursued to the detriment of public interests. By according priority to public interest, the altruistic leader creates conditions for effectiveness and competence.
for public service delivery. Shared values can make employees feel good about working, and this tends to lead to a feeling of commitment that makes individuals want to achieve (Shaw 1997:31).

The communication of a clear vision and clarification of purpose to address public sector needs aligning behavior with goals. It should be emphasized that communication should include words and deeds. Public leaders must be the living embodiments of service delivery-culture. The practices they want to infuse in their organization must be displayed in their consistent behavior. Such behavior motivates subordinates toward purposeful behavior (Kotter and Heskett 1992:98). The Public Service Code of Conduct requires public servants to keep public interest in their minds and to promote the well being of society. By promoting these basic values of public administration, an environment conducive to ethical behavior can be fostered. Both leaders and their subordinates can achieve a greater sense of organizational achievement through their commitment to the organization’s purpose (Covey 1996:69).

3. EGOISM AND LEADERSHIP

Leaders, who are loyal to themselves and merely interested in personal gains, adopt an egoistic position (Malan and Smit 2001:61). Such positioning perpetuates an organizational culture of poor governance and performance. Often a culture of unethical behavior reigns, to the detriment of a competent public service.

By focusing on their personal interests, poor prioritization develops, often resulting in a decrease in the standards of service delivery. Such leaders frequently justify incompetence and dropping standards in an endeavor to cover unethical behavior. The Department of Home Affairs is manifest with widespread corruption. The subordination of public interest has negated the requirement for accountability and responsibility in this department. The influence of personal advantage over the general desire to do what is right and in the best interest of the public has resulted in violation of people’s rights and a loss of credibility for this department.

Egoistic leadership is founded on aspiration and ambition and thus unworthy to achieve the desired purposes of their department. There are many departments in the public service that have failed to be associated with appropriate principles or purposes. Instead, they have taken personal ownership to advance wealth, position and power. Aspiring leaders do not focus on public needs rather they are strongly concerned with their own agendas. Failure to dedicate themselves to the selfless service of the public has often led to unacceptable standards of service delivery.

If the insight of public leaders is one of egoism, then the public service merely becomes an arena for them to realize and satisfy their greed for self-gratification. The Travel-gate scandal is an example of public officials abusing public funds for personal travel. Personal needs dominated their behavior on the expenses of public funds.

In South Africa, redress and reconstruction of a racially imbalanced polity and economy are the major imperatives driven democracy. In many departments, like the Department of Public Enterprises, conflicting interests of personal enrichment and patronage have compromised empowerment strategies, through the use of the state to redirect accumulation processes. Conflict of interest is fairly rampant in the public sector (PPSC 2008:21). There are numerous cases of public servants who are councilors or who have their own companies, of course, not in their own names, who are doing business within the government. Dual employment creates scope for pursuing self-interest in the absence of clear regulatory policy governing conflict of interest.
Many of the concerns regarding service delivery can be attributed to the performance of public officials (PSC 2007:vii). While expanding service, a sustained effort to improve standards has failed in many of the government departments because of persons-to-post mismatch, lack of skills and lack of performance standards. These contributory factors can be linked to egoistic leaders, who have assumed posts without giving consideration to performance based on accountability and responsibility.

4. PURPOSE OF PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

The existence of any institution is directly linked to its purpose (Toit and Waldt 1999: 299). Public institutions, with different resources, deliver specific and general services, which the public cannot provide in their individual capacity. In providing such services, public institutions aim to improve the general welfare of society. The delivery of services is therefore, the overall responsibility of government departments.

The White Paper on Transforming Public Service Delivery, Pele (1997:7) introduced the principles to transform public service delivery. Any endeavor to meet the basic needs of the public must be driven by the ‘people first’ approach. In providing public services, public institutions are obligated in the following ways according to the Pele’s principles (1997:7).

- Provision of equal services to all citizens.
- Consulting with citizens about their services rights.
- Information sharing quality of services provision.
- Considerate and courteous treatment of the public.
- Transparency on how government departments are to be managed.
- Accountability for quality service provision.
- Responsibility for providing efficient, effective and economic services.

The Public Service Report (PSR) (2007:23) stated that service delivery was affected by a lack of commitment to go beyond the call of duty, as there was a general indifference to the customer – centric principles embodied in Pele (1997). Ubuntu, meaning “I am because we are”, is central to public leadership as it focuses on collective commitment, caring and respect. The philosophy of ubuntu is closely tied to purpose driven public institutions striving to achieve their mission and full potential. It places much importance on concern for people as well as striving for common goals, which are essentially the underlying purpose of public institutions.

Employees of public institutions are obligated to treat people with respect, dignity and care. Further, the public has a legitimate right according to the tenets of democracy to receive quality services. Therefore, government departments are not only responsible for the purpose of their existence, but are also accountable to the public in executing their responsibilities.

4. LEADERSHIP AND SERVICE DELIVERY

Public service delivery has to be characterized by efficiency, effectiveness and economical, which underpins ethical principles. It is fair to say that government departments are established to satisfy public needs. Some of the needs include social security, education, health and rural development. It is the foundation upon which all activities of public institutions are based. Any activity performed for the delivery of public services starts with the development of purpose and strategies, underpinned by ethics in public administration and management. If ethics is not part of the overall strategy and purpose of the institution, then it will not influence purpose -driven leadership. Given that the public is dependant on public institutions for services...
like protection, health and education, the state has an inescapable duty to provide sound public administration within the democratic structures of public institutions.

Section 195(1) of the Constitution, 1996 states that public administration must:
- Respond to peoples needs,
- Promote effective economic and efficient use of resources, and
- Maintain a high standard of professional ethics.

Public accountability and responsibility are integral characteristics of public administration. The realization of a ‘Better Life for All’ as mentioned in the Peoples Contract largely depends on a public service that is responsive to the needs of the people (PSCR 2007:vii). Leaders have an indispensable role to play in executing these principles. By doing so, ethical behavior in the public sector is not undermined and quality of service delivery is not compromised. In South Africa, the gradual degeneration of many public sector institutions can also be traced to the lessening of the commitment or incompetence of leaders to execute their public responsibilities.

The absence of public minded leaders whose energies are not harnessed to organizational purposes affects quality public service delivery (Jack 1998:71). Leadership has to create an organizational culture that directs any public service institution to achieve its purpose. This requires the leader to have a holistic awareness of the organization’s priorities so that right decisions can be made to avoid inefficiency and mal-administration. Leadership must proactively develop a culture that guides decisions and actions for quality service from public service institutions. Trevino and Nelson (2004:226) maintain that organizational systems must be aligned so that the entire organization is committed to a culture of efficiency and effectiveness. This article maintains that leadership must send a consistent message through its actions so that a leadership culture positively impacts on the delivery of services.

Citizen surveys conducted by the Public Service Commission to generate information on satisfactory services, provided by government departments, revealed that the average satisfaction was 67%, with the lowest being Correctional Services with 58%, followed by Home Affairs with 61% and Housing being 62% (PSC 2008:57). Such compelling findings suggest that service delivery is not meeting public expectations. It can be suggested that absence of a strong leadership, adhering to strict standards has eroded the credibility of these institutions. Despite many years of democracy and promises of improved public services, evidence still exists of inadequate or poor quality public services. Leaders need skills in decision-making, communication, problem solving and team work to successfully meet organizational goals. These skills create circumstances for personal growth, development and scope needed to improve service delivery (Malan Smit 2001:37). By “walking the talk”, leaders deliberately spell out what they stand for and enforce standards for improved public service delivery (Trevino and Nelson 2004:154). Roth (2005:50) supports this claim and says that standards help to differentiate between acceptable and un-acceptable, as well as between ethical and unethical behavior. In the public sector, the satisfaction of public needs can be considered as the primary standard against which to measure quality service delivery.

Poor performance in the public sector is frequently attributed to poor prioritization. Poor prioritization can be considered a matter of not having a strong purpose aligned to the basic principles of public administration. If leaders are unwilling to drive public institutions to deliver public services of acceptable standards, then the ability to transform to a more effective and efficient public service culture is inhibited.

5. CHALLENGES FACING ETHICAL PRACTICES
Fox and Meyer (1995:45) define ethics as rules and principles that determine right and wrong conduct. Leadership in public administration has to maintain an ethics based environment, which encompasses such rules and principles.

In South Africa, the ethical framework includes the following laws and regulations:
- Protected Disclosures Act, 2000 (Act 26 of 2000).

Other initiatives by government include:
- The National Anti-Corruption Forum.
- Directorate of Special Operations: Public Prosecutions.
- Moral Regeneration Movement.
- Anti Corruption Capacity Requirements.
- Public Service Code of Conduct.
- National Anti Corruption Hotline.

The Public Service Commission, Independent Complaints Directorate, Auditor General, Public Protector and National Prosecuting Authority are institutions, which address manifestations of unethical behavior.

While all departments are obligated to establish an infrastructure ethics as per government requirements, ethical practice is still a major challenge facing the South African government. The PSCSR (2001:109) revealed the following:
- Ineffective and very basic ethics infrastructures.
- Inadequate responsibility for ethics’ programs.
- Ethics training is ineffective.
- Ethics criteria are neglected in performance management.
- Inadequate integration of ethics management practices with all processes.
- Financial risks supersede reputation risks when determining ethical priorities.
- Reluctance to enforce ethic codes.

More specifically, the State of the Public Service Commission Report highlighted the following findings associated with leadership (PSCR 2008:20):
- The level of compliance with the Financial Disclosure Framework was below 100%, of which five national departments had a compliance rate of 0%. This suggests a lack of will to encourage a culture of ethical leadership.
- The absence of clear regulations on the conflict of interests system has impacted on the neutrality of public servants who hold dual employment and have business interests with government. This affects sustaining high standards of public ethics.
- The lack of a national integrity system to align leaders from different sectors.

The above findings reveal an inadequate commitment to ethical practice, which impacts on the effectiveness of regulations and frameworks guiding ethical practice. Although government introduced the Public Service Integrated Anti-Corruption Strategy, the prevalence of unethical behavior still persists. The inference is that
unless a high level priority status is accorded to ethics within the institution’s strategic thrust, very little will change (Van Rooyen 2008:400).

Merely paying only lip service to the ethical framework guiding the public sector is unacceptable.

There has to be greater emphasis on communicating how a higher level of ethical commitment can be achieved. It is argued that leadership directing all behavior, actions and strategies to purpose driven public service delivery can achieve this.

6. ETHICS AND PURPOSE DRIVEN LEADERSHIP

The effective and efficient delivery of public services can be identified as the underlying purpose of any public institution. Leadership, through action, must contribute to this goal or purpose so that all employees in the organization can competently and ethically pursue service delivery excellence. Bennis (1997:154) views this as the essential difference between leading and management. Leadership focuses on doing the right things while managing is merely doing things right. There is a general perception that institutions are often under led and over managed.

Leadership needs to direct the behavior of others toward the accomplishment of the organization’s purpose. Embodying and empowering every individual in the organization to implement and execute the purpose in everything they do makes the purpose a “living purpose” (Bennis 1997: 155). If leadership cannot infuse energy into the organization to translate purpose into reality, then organizational performance can be jeopardized. This article argues that an empowering purpose has a significant impact on the ability to see beyond the present reality, the invention of what does not yet exist and the creation of quality of life results (Covey 1999:104). An empowering purpose can fuel and nurture a requisite purpose in all employees within public sector institutions.

There is a growing trend towards leadership-based ethics of excellence associated with truthfulness, accountability and objectivity (Keen 2001:13). It is a leadership based on character and competence rather than position. Such an adherence is a critical building block of organizational productivity. Instead of obsessively being driven by personal ambition and wealth, leaders should be driven by giving service to the public. Such an approach enables government to respond to citizens needs and utilize scarce resources in priority areas like health and education in the most efficient and effective manner. This is important in view of reports that suggest public confidence in government institutions and leaders have dropped (PSC 2008:14). While government has shown commitment in promoting an ethical public service, the public considers standards in ethical practice dropping. The need, therefore, exists for leadership driven by a purpose that can become a motivating force so powerful that it is ingrained and integrated into every aspect of the public service and becomes the compelling impetus behind every decision (Covey 1999:105).

Blanchard and Peale (1998) in Malan and Smit 2007:84) argue that a clear purpose is the foundation upon which sound ethical behavior is built. Since public services and goods are provided to satisfy clearly identified needs, purpose driven leadership embraces the greater needs of society. By defining a shared purpose, which promotes the interest of all concerned, leadership focuses attention away from the self to public interest. A shared purpose must serve as a reliable guide for decisions. One can claim that decisions are altruistic when the decision is in alignment with the mission. Some government departments are guilty of poor service delivery because of the inconsistency between organizational purpose and leadership. When leadership decisions are not aligned to the purpose, then such decisions lack integrity since it does not fit with the department’s purpose. There has to be consistency between what leaders strive for and what they do (Brown 2005:114).
Malan and Smit (2001:83) identified the following advantages of a purpose driven approach:

- Purpose is clear and need-driven.
- Subjective distortion of the purpose is minimized.
- The leader and his subordinates are disciplined to perform ethically.
- The purpose is aligned with the needs and expectations of everyone affected.
- The purpose encourages excellent performance by all concerned.

Such an approach in the public sector re-unites with the basic principles of public service delivery. However, the purpose must be continually reinforced to guide, inspire and promote ethical conduct. When public leaders align themselves with the purpose of the organization, subordinates are more likely to show commitment toward improved performance. In the South African public sector, which is plagued by unethical leadership, the purpose driven approach can influence organizations to sustain credibility, honesty and integrity. Without demonstrating commitment to the purpose of the organization, public leaders cannot expect subordinates to identify with the organization and behave congruently with organizational goals. The purpose driven leader, by putting on the harness of service and thinking of others, creates a climate that is high performance in nature (Covey 1996:34). Public servants need to be optimistic and enthusiastic. Creating a climate for these potentials to develop is to a large extent dependant on a leader who has a sense of responsibility, service and energy field to inspire and motivate beyond personal interest.

7. PRE-CONDITIONS FOR PURPOSE DRIVEN LEADERSHIP

Pursuing the purpose of meeting basic human needs and respecting human rights entails leadership giving consideration to key elements necessary for effective purpose driven leadership. These elements must not only be communicated, but also serve as guiding principles. The key elements include the following (Covey 1996:165-172):

- A shared vision that is clearly understood at all levels of the organization. A vision can be considered a shared vision if it has meaning to employees. All public institutions have mission statements, but many employees are not committed to it because it is not part of the organizational culture and as such, has no significance to them. A further, constant change in leadership often results in new strategy and direction, which affects commitment, standards and achievement of goals (PSC 2007:21).

- A well developed strategy which effectively expresses the mission statement and meets the needs of all stakeholders. Public departments cannot accomplish their strategic plans if leaders do not know where they want to be after a period of time or what kind of organization they want to create. A strategic plan, which does not reflect environmental realities like inadequate resources or the vision of the institution, cannot proactively respond to public needs. Further, the lack of will by public leaders to implement strategies has contributed to poor service delivery. A case in point is the numerous cases of abuse in the tendering process by various government departments.

- Structures and systems must reinforce the vision of the organization. Many departments have rigid structures and systems with little flexibility to adapt to environmental realities. This distorts the alignment between structures and a shared vision.

- Management style must be congruent and consistent with the mission statement. Public leaders under the new dispensation are obligated to think in terms of principle-centered leadership because environmental realities like corruption and fraud necessitate adapting management style to organizational style.
Trust based on competence opens communication, which is vital for organizational excellence. Incompetent public leaders will not be trusted by their subordinates and invariably, contribute to a culture of poor teamwork in driving the mission of the institution.

Integrity is vital to win the confidence of employees in the organization and the external environment. Leaders, who lack integrity, fail to live by the mission statement and thereby find it difficult to influence their employees to execute their functions effectively and efficiently in delivering public services.

The aforementioned pre-conditions have to be complemented by leaders who are role models of consistent ethical behavior. This requires leaders to translate guidelines and processes into action. This gives contextual significance through leading by example. Mafunisa (2008:85) argues that if unethical practices exist at the top of the hierarchy, it is likely to permeate the entire public service. Therefore, modelling through purpose driven leadership can have a powerful influence on public servants personifying the values of the public service (Mafunisa 2008:85). Malan and Smit (2007:105), supported the view that the behavior of leadership are the basis upon which trust, credibility and communication is designed. It can be suggested that leaders who do not benchmark their actions against purpose, values and standards, cannot expect to impart purpose and higher expectations to others (Melrose 1995:129).

While policy and regulatory frameworks set the guidelines for ethical behavior, it is imperative that leaders structure and implement strategies to ensure that decisions relating to service delivery are made within an ethical milieu of policy and regulatory frameworks. Covey (1999:140) views such a conscious decision as a principle based focus, which directs time and energy toward a purpose which can produce quality of life results. It can be suggested that the impetus is created to do the right thing for the right reasons.

8. PERSONAL ETHICS AND PUBLIC SERVICE ETHICS

Apart from the Constitution of South Africa and other legislation guiding public administration and management, the personal value system of the public leader has an influence on performance in public life. The efficient and fair management of any government department is to a large extent attributable to the personal ethics of leaders. Clapper 1999:138) states that public officials apply ethical principles when executing their functions. What they do and how they do it is influenced by personal ethics. It is argued that no public leader enters the public administration arena without predetermined ethical influences from different sectors. It can be stated that the possession of a personal sense of ethical behavior is an imperative for the implementation of service delivery excellence.

South Africa is faced with problems of personal ethics. There is a general perception that democracy has been accompanied by a decreasing concern for the collective good in exchange for pre-occupation with personal advancement and enrichment. Structures like the Moral Regeneration Movement and the Anti-Corruption Co-ordination Committee, within the Department of Public Service and Administration, have been established to address ethical issues. However, due to the lack of a co-ordinate approach for meaningful and sustainable implementation appears to be major challenge affecting the effectiveness of such structures.

Personal ethics is vital since its application is necessary when policy, procedures and codes of conduct are not specific at all times and under different circumstances (Clapper 1999:139). Furthermore, a clear sense of personal ethics can help to establish congruency with public service ethics. It is the personal ethics that increases the quality of service delivery in the broader interest of the public. Mafunisa (2008:86) argues that the public service needs to align its code of conduct with the behavior exemplified by those in authority. He views it as similar to translating a mission statement into a vision and then into measurable goals. Such an alignment reduces uncertainty as to what is considered ethical and unethical.
Overspending and poor management has affected government departments, like the Department of Social Development. The lack of experience or incompetence of political appointees reflects a weak domain of personal ethics and does not serve as a barrier against unethical behavior. It can be viewed as an abuse of power.

The public administration environment is dynamic and complex. Rules and guidelines do not change all the time, but leadership has to adapt with informed discretion to contextual change and challenges. It is therefore important for leaders to be purpose driven in an ever-changing environment. By ensuring the well being of society as a rationale for their behavior, responsiveness to public needs is prioritized. Personal ethics can only be of value if it is molded with the purpose of the public service. It is therefore incumbent on public leaders to steer their personal value systems toward an ethical public service direction so that the rendering of services is of the greatest benefit to the public. Section 195(1) of the Constitution, 1996 requires public leaders to promote and maintain high standards of professional ethics. Legally and ethically, public leaders are invariably bound by the Constitution to advance the identified rights of the public. Understanding and implementing the guiding principles for public administration, as reflected in the Constitution, are imperative for any public leader, who is concerned with the interests and protection of the public. In this regard, Fraser (2008:2) former Minister of Public Service and Administration states that the public service needs to get better at doing whatever it does by renewing its focus on effectiveness across the entire public sector. This necessitates leadership demonstrating a commitment to a value system based on the fundamentals of integrity and honesty in the public interest. It can be argued that such a commitment should be integrated with the purpose of the institution so that everyone literally lives by it through their actions (Covey 1997:44).

It is therefore essential for the personal ethics of public leaders to be compatible with the principles necessary for ethical public administration. In the absence of this, accountability and responsibility cannot be apportioned in performing duties on behalf of the public (Klapper 1999:150).

10. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this article it has been argued that an empowering purpose has a significant impact on the ability to see beyond the present reality. An effective and efficient public service has to be purpose-driven by leadership, which prioritizes the needs of the public. A utilitarian and egoistic approach of showing concern for the broader welfare of the public should not be compromised for the imperatives of personal enrichment and aggrandizement. Such egoistic imperatives lead to ethical degeneration. When leaders show commitment and consistency in their behavior, subordinates are influenced to do likewise. An empowering purpose can fuel and nurture a requisite purpose in all employees within public sector institutions. All of this is embodied in an ethical based culture founded upon purpose driven leadership.

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Enhancing an Ethical Culture

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