

## Assessing the Ethical Culture of Your Agency

By Jan Perkins, Senior ICMA Advisor, Arne Croce, City Manager, San Mateo and JoAnne Speers, Executive Director, Institute for Local Government

Personal ethics is important. However, as the leader of his or her agency, the manager is responsible for more. If an employee makes an ethical or legal misstep, ultimately it will reflect poorly on the manager. It will also reflect on the public's perception of one's agency.

How then, does a manager promote public confidence in the agency as a whole, as the guidelines to the ICMA Code of Ethics suggest?<sup>1</sup> A key way is to lead one's agency in a way that fosters a *culture of ethics*.

### Organizational Cultures as a Determinant of Organizational Behaviors

Ethics and public confidence are not just about a manager's faithful adherence to the ICMA Code of Ethics—although clearly that's an important first step. Just as superior organizational performance requires everyone to be pulling in the same direction, so does organizational ethics. Your staff is likely to engage in behaviors that they believe are valued by management. What signals are you sending about the kinds of behaviors and attitudes you value? What kinds of behaviors are rewarded? Does your organization have a mission or values statement? Are ethical values a part of that statement?

One way to find out what kinds of signals your staff is picking up is to do an assessment—either formally or informally. From there, one can determine the agency's strengths and weakness. That in term can help a manager to formulate a strategy to maximize the agency's ethical culture. An assessment can also be a jumping off point for internal ethics education efforts.

ICMA and the Institute for Local Government have collaborated on a tool to help managers reflect on their organization's culture in terms of ethics. The tool is available online without charge at [www.ca-ilg.org/culturechecks](http://www.ca-ilg.org/culturechecks). The questionnaire probes such issues as whether employees feel encouraged to:

- Use ethical behaviors in the process of getting results on behalf of the public;
- Feel encouraged to comply with the spirit, as well as the letter, of laws; and

---

<sup>1</sup> See ICMA Code of Ethics, Tenet 3, Guideline 1:

**Public Confidence.** Members should conduct themselves so as to maintain public confidence in their profession, *their local government*, and in their performance of the public trust.

(emphasis added).

- Display civility and respect for their colleagues, even when there is disagreement.

The assessment has three parts: 1) the employees' perceptions of expectations of the employee, 2) the employee's perceptions of management's attitudes and behaviors, and 3) the employee's perceptions of elected officials' attitudes and behaviors.

The assessment can be used in a number of ways. The first and most modest is for a manager to review the questions and anticipate what kinds of responses the organization's employees are likely to give to the questions. Most managers will have a fairly strong sense of their organization's culture. Thinking about the questions on the assessment can alert managers to potential ethical blind spots (for example, a "get it done" or "whatever it takes" culture) or problem areas.

The next approach is for managers to ask their leadership team to complete the assessment. This approach offers a manager the opportunity to receive feedback on the organization's culture and sensitize the management team to the kinds of issues that can either enhance or erode an organization's ethical culture.

Another way the assessment can be used is for all employees to take the assessment. This will give a manager a top to bottom assessment of his or her team's sensitivity to ethics issues and the kinds of prevailing messages in the organization.

Finally, elected and appointed officials can also be included in the assessment process as part of an overall organizational commitment to ethics.

### **The San Mateo Experience**

The City of San Mateo used a phased approach to assessing its organizational culture. The manager first introduced the concept at a management team meeting in early 2006. The meeting involved a discussion of general principles of public service ethics and the nature of the assessment process. Top management staff expressed enthusiasm for going forward with the assessment as one step in a process to reinforce and strengthen the city's ethical culture.

The management team agreed to complete the assessment. The manager met with the team to discuss 1) the results of the survey and 2) thoughts on the city's current environment and how it could be strengthened even further. The team also provided valuable input on how to maximize the effectiveness of the assessment instrument.

The group decided to take the discussion deeper into the organization. The assessment was distributed to line managers (about 50 positions) responsible for major divisions within the city departments. The managers then received the results of their feedback in a workshop that included a review of public service ethics principles and frameworks.

The assessment was then distributed to all members of the city organization. As this article goes to press, the results of the full assessment are still being tabulated. Earlier

distributions to management indicated a very strong culture of ethics within the organization—a very positive sign of course. Staff also rated the city council’s ethics highly, suggesting a strong “tone at the top.”

In spite of the city’s already-strong commitment to ethical practices, the city is exploring ways to reinforce that culture in a number of ways. Department heads are being encouraged to discuss ethical dimensions of issues that their people face. The city is offering training to those departments who request it. The manager is also exploring adding ethics as value to the city’s statement of core values.

## **The Thousand Oaks Experience**

[Jan’s insertion]

### **Conclusion**

Asking staff to complete the assessment can be a scary proposition to be sure. However, this is a situation in which what you don’t know really can hurt you professionally and personally. Having ethics issues arise within the agency on one’s watch can damage one’s reputation as a manager; it can also take a significant personal toll in terms of stress and efforts to engage in damage control.

Even anticipating how one’s staff will respond to the questions can provide helpful food for thought to a manager who has strong personal ethics but may have emphasized other issues in hiring, performance evaluation and other forms of feedback on what the manager values. It’s never too early to have discussions with staff about your commitment to serving the public both effectively and ethically.

As management expert Peter Drucker observed, “Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things.” Are you leading your organization to do the right things?

### **[Begin Sidebar] Issues Explored by Ethics Assessment**

The Institute/ICMA ethics assessment explores the following kinds of issues in an organization:

1. Do employees feel encouraged to come forward and report any unethical practices they see in the course of their duties?
2. Are members of the public treated equally regardless of personal or political connections?
3. What is the prevailing attitude about the acceptance of gifts or favors from those who do business with the agency? Okay? Not Okay?

4. Is an environment of ethics and professionalism actively promoted within the agency?
5. Are employees encouraged to act according to the spirit, as well as the letter of the law?
6. Is the public treated with civility and respect?

The assessment asks these questions from three points of view. 1) What do respondents do? 2) What do respondents perceive management as doing? 3) What do respondents perceive elected officials as doing?

[End Sidebar]

[Sidebar Promoting ICMA's Training Efforts?]