
Corruption prevention in the midst of crisis?

Workshop 4: Ethics offices for the public administration?

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Abstract:

Corruption was for a very long time perceived as a problem of individuals involved in it: society has asked for them to take responsibility, procedures (disciplinary, administrative, criminal...) have been developed and people have been sanctioned. Even the worst corruption deeds were not considered as something worth discussing more broadly than in the terms of individuals' accountability. Modern organisational theories reveal that corruption harms different types of organisations. It has also been discovered that many features within organisations might have both a very negative and a very positive impact on the existence and level of corruption within those organisations.

Already the most basic surveys showed that organisation of legal entities, their management, desired or factual working processes, established system of liabilities, recruitment and promotions, salaries, legal rules and ethical principles, whistleblowing and many other components are also influencing the level of corruption within entities. Therefore, in many organisations throughout the world the logical question appeared: *should we leave the fight against corruption at the individual's level or should we raise it to the organisational level?* The answer was very simple and private companies were the first to deal with the issue in an organised manner. By doing this, they had in mind that psychologically it was much easier to involve their employees in the establishment of the highest possible level of integrity by referring to the company's responsibility rather than to the individual's responsibility. Before long the public sector got involved in those activities too.

The most common causes of problems in the area of integrity (as opposed to corruption) in the public sector were identified as the following: managers do not have enough authority; management does not set a good example; rules or principles have not been properly explained or justified; officials do not have enough work to use up their time and attention; officials have low morale; culture and bad habits; unsuitable new employees are not identified and removed within their probationary periods.

Following the findings on reasons for low integrity/high corruption, the logical question appeared: *how to eliminate the risks and achieve the conditions in the organisations, which would result in a very unfriendly environment for the existence and development of corruption?* Several answers were found according to which the following situation had to be established: management cares about the officials, understand the objectives of public administration and know what is expected from them in achieving those objectives; officials are kept informed of their progress and they feel that they can influence management and have a say in the decisions which affect them; the workload and standards required are reasonable; there is no favouritism; rules are fair, sensible, applied to all and properly explained; where possible, those who are subject to the rules have been involved in establishing them or can be involved in changing

them; job content is meaningful with an element of job satisfaction; management balances the requirements of the task, the needs of the group and the individual; any criticism given is constructive; managers represent their officials' problems and grievances to higher management and they defend their team from outside criticism but take action to eradicate the cause of it; team spirit is encouraged; managers anticipate and take action against problems which could cause grievance and speak well of the organisation; there is a good training and development programme for all officials,...

It became clear that an ethical competence of employees had to be developed. This was realised by the private sector first, especially by large multi-national companies. Public sector, especially in the common law system, soon followed the example of the private sector. Some very important ideas emerged in the area of ethical competence:

- no code of ethics or law would be of any practical value, if public officials do not recognise an ethics problem for what it is, when they see it;
- deciding what to do depends on what the officials have been taught to recognise as important, in a particular context;
- ethical competence would include making 'a good decision' and giving relevant reasons for the decision;
- as in any specialisation, training would be required to help recognise the symptoms of an important problem and to know what to do about it.

Another very logical question appeared: *should the employees take care of their ethical competence by themselves or should their organisations help?* Since corruption was recognised as a problem for organisations, it was obvious that organisations had to assist their employees and the most appropriate solution had to be found concerning the person or unit authorised and accountable for this area. In small entities managers could be the ones responsible for counselling their employees on ethical problems - under the precondition that they had the expert knowledge required. However, organisations, especially in public administration, are usually much larger and it was impossible for their managers to get involved in organisational ethics.

As a result, large private organisations started to establish so-called "compliance officers" in the form of individuals or units with the simple task: to assist their employees when they come across ethical problems. In the public sector this is still a solution, which is not widespread in continental Europe. However, if we demand our officials to act with a high level of integrity and we recognise that ethics can be a very demanding issue, then there has to be someone in public organisations to assist them as well. There need to exist individuals or units to whom the officials can talk to or seek for advice. The sooner all public organisations have them, the better. At the beginning this might entail certain investments in terms of personnel and other resources, but at the end of the day, it will become clear that this was a good and needed investment.