

Leading Veterans To Post-Military Life

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Abstract:

This paper explores ethical leadership in the public sector through the experiences of two leaders in Veterans services—one a military Veteran and the other a civilian. It examines how their personal and professional backgrounds shape their approaches to decision-making, service, and organizational culture. Highlighting the importance of integrity, inclusivity, and values-driven action in supporting Veterans and fostering ethical public administration this paper offers insight for the principles guiding effective and compassionate leadership in the field.

Leaders in the public service sector, both public and private, operate in environments where they balance competing priorities with limited resources. This creates opportunities for innovative decision-making and growth. As public administrators progress in their careers, developing a strong moral compass is an ongoing process, one that evolves as they gain experience and insights. Reflecting on the development of this framework enables leaders to continue evolving and enhancing their approach, ensuring it remains aligned with their values and the needs of their organizations. This paper will explore two public administration leaders in the Veterans services sector—one who is a Veteran and one who is not—and examine how their personal and professional experiences have shaped their development as ethical public leaders.

Participant A has recently been appointed as the Executive Director of a Veterans Service Agency in a county in New York and has over a decade of leadership in higher education, government, and nonprofit sectors. They are a U.S. Army Veteran who served as an Intelligence Analyst in the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars, and is a dedicated public servant and advocate for Veterans and underserved communities. Participant A spent nearly 12 years working at a community college in roles including Director of Student Support Services, which oversaw the school's services for student Veterans, and Interim Associate Dean of Students. They are also an adjunct professor, an elected trustee in their community, and a board member of a nonprofit organization.

Participant B serves as Director of Veteran Transition at a city Veterans agency in New York. They are a committed public servant with over four years of experience at their agency, where they advanced from Student Intern to Director of Veteran Transition. Throughout their roles, including Policy Analyst and Transition Services Manager, they have played a key role in improving services for the city's Veteran community through policy development, interagency

coordination, and transition support. Their advancement within the agency reflects their dedication and consistent efforts to expand meaningful support for Veterans across the city. Among their many successful initiatives over the past three years, they have led the launch of five military and Veteran summits in their city – all held in partnership with local professional sports teams and held at their respective stadiums – that also included a wide range of collaborative partnerships with public and private partners and multiple levels of the public sector.

REFLECTING BACK

Participant A reflects on a defining moment in their public service career that exemplified their commitment to ethical leadership. One of the most pivotal decisions of their tenure as a Trustee in their village was their public support for affordable housing developments in two affluent communities – an initiative that drew significant resistance from segments of the community. Despite the controversy, Participant A stood firm in their belief that housing diversity is a fundamental right and a vital component of a strong, inclusive community. They recognized that leadership meant representing the entire village, not just those who shared their political views. While opponents voiced concerns about changes to the town's and village's character and potential effects on property values, Participant A prioritized principles of empathy, justice, and equity. They engaged with residents and integrated the issue into broader planning discussions, ensuring that ethical values guided both the process and outcome. In this situation, Participant A used their position as a public administration leader to cast light and step behind the veil of ignorance to make a moral choice. In doing so, they set aside considerations of wealth, education, gender, and race to determine what he thought was best for the community (Johnson, 2018, p. 154).

Participant B reflected on an experience early in their city government career that tested their ethical leadership. Faced with pressure to meet job placement quotas, they chose instead to prioritize the long-term well-being of a recently discharged Veteran struggling with reintegration, disability, and employment stigma. Rather than placing him in a quick, high-turnover role to boost performance metrics, Participant B advocated for a meaningful position that aligned with his skills and goals. They collaborated closely with the Veteran to build his confidence and resume, while also forging a new partnership with an employer open to customizing a role. Their decision demonstrated integrity, respect, justice, and accountability. This resulted in the Veteran's lasting success and a new, values-driven hiring partner for the agency. This experience reaffirmed their belief that ethical leadership requires putting people over numbers, even when it means pushing back against institutional pressures. Participant B clearly exhibited ethical autonomy in this situation by resisting organizational pressure and refusing to conform to what Cooper (2006, p. 230) describes as "impression management," or the tendency of public organizations to focus on appearances. Instead, they remained guided by their ethical convictions and prioritized the greater public good over superficial performance measures.

EXPLORING INWARD

Reflecting on their experience in advocating for affordable housing developments, Participant A acknowledged the challenges and unexpected outcomes that accompanied their ethical stance. While their support for socio-economic diversity may have cost them favor with some, it also strengthened their values to the community they serve. This decision may have earned them a few detractors but also garnered a measure of respect and credibility among others. At the core of Participant A's ethical approach is a strong commitment to servant leadership, transparency, and inclusivity. They view their role as one of service, focused on the

growth, well-being, and empowerment of those he represents. Transparency, for them, is essential to building trust and ensuring honesty, while inclusivity ensures that diverse voices and experiences shape the decision-making process. As a servant leader, it is clear that Participant A acts out of a sense of duty and obligation to promote the wellbeing of the entire community they serve (Johnson, 2018, p. 253). These guiding principles form the foundation of their leadership philosophy and continue to inform their actions as a public servant.

Participant B reflected on how this pivotal experience deepened their understanding of ethical leadership and human-centered decision-making. They realized that employment decisions, especially for vulnerable populations like Veterans, are not simply about securing a paycheck, but about considering the broader social and emotional implications of each role. This experience reinforced their belief that ethical leadership must go beyond surface-level outcomes to support long-term well-being. Participant B feels motivated by the values of integrity, accountability, empathy, courage, and service. These principles guide their leadership by encouraging honest and consistent action, fostering trust, standing firm in difficult situations, and always prioritizing the needs of others. This inward reflection has helped them shape a leadership identity rooted in purpose and a commitment to doing what is right, even when it is not easy. In this situation of prioritizing the Veteran's needs, Participant B experienced a conflict with their objective and subjective responsibilities. In this role, Participant B established a value subsystem – a framework for fulfilling their objective responsibilities in a manner aligned with their personal values and inner convictions (Cooper, 2006, p. 98). They met her external obligations while allowing their sense of subjective responsibility to inform and guide their decision-making.

LOOKING FORWARD

Participant A noted the vital importance of ethical leadership in navigating the increasingly polarized political environment of today and the future. They cautioned against the growing trend of leaders placing political agendas above the needs of the people, often resulting in short-sighted decisions and a neglect of broader societal issues. For Participant A, a strong ethical framework is not only a moral imperative but a strategic necessity for sustained success in public service and nonprofit leadership. Looking ahead, they believe that ethical principles, rooted in integrity, transparency, and a commitment to the public good, can help bridge divides and foster common ground. In a world marked by growing complexity, the ability to collaborate across ideological and sectoral lines is more critical than ever. Participant A sees ethical leadership as a catalyst for meaningful dialogue, cooperation, and long-term problem-solving in an era that demands unity over division. Although Participant A is not native to the community they serve, they clearly demonstrate community identity with principles such as public interest, social equity, regime values and citizen obligation as they consider the needs of the public over their organizational identity (Cooper, 2006, p. 255).

Looking ahead, Participant B underscores the vital importance of cultivating strong team morale as a cornerstone of organizational success. They assert that in both public and nonprofit sectors, the effectiveness of any organization is closely linked to the strength of its internal culture. When team members are united by shared values and a commitment to ethical behavior, even in difficult situations, leaders can foster a more supportive and trustworthy environment. A key pillar of this culture is emotional intelligence, which involves awareness of one's own emotions, understanding the emotions of others, and managing both effectively. This emotional alignment enables team members to model healthy behaviors, setting positive emotional norms

within the group. As Johnson notes, emotionally intelligent teams tend to be more effective and productive (2018, pp. 298–299). By building on a shared ethical and emotional foundation, teams are better equipped to collaborate, adapt, and succeed.

IMAGINING

In reflecting on their career, Participant A shared their commitment to service, inclusion, and ethical integrity as guiding principles. They reflected on their efforts to cultivate a community where diverse voices are heard and valued through an ongoing process grounded in actively seeking input and prioritizing the collective needs of the people they serve. For Participant A, leadership is not exerting authority, but about balancing adaptability with decisive action when the stakes are high. Their approach is deeply collaborative, marked by frequent engagement with stakeholders and a strong reliance on expert and community insight to inform their decisions. Accountability is another cornerstone of their leadership philosophy as they consistently emphasize transparency and ownership, ensuring that the rationale behind their decisions is clearly communicated and responsibly upheld.

Participant A's ethical foundation draws heavily from the Army Values they embraced as a paratrooper in the 82nd Airborne Division – Leadership, Duty, Respect, Selfless-Service, Honor, Integrity, and Personal Courage. These values, combined with their religious beliefs and the principle that “we rise by lifting others,” shape their view of leadership as an act of service centered on uplifting those around him. Participant A believes that ethical leadership will remain essential to effective governance. In an age of rapid information sharing and heightened public scrutiny, leaders must lead with fairness, inclusivity, and authenticity. They clearly exhibit the four key components of responsible conduct as described by Cooper in his decision-making, and also promote an ethical environment through individual attributes, organizational culture,

organizational structure, and societal expectations (Cooper, 2006, p. 188). By staying grounded in values, Participant A has effectively navigated the complexities of public service and promotes collective progress through trust and consistency.

In imagining the future of public service and nonprofit leadership, Participant B envisions a landscape where ethical leadership is not only essential but foundational to long-term success. They believe that integrity, accountability, and service are critical for building trust, fostering team morale, and sustaining organizational credibility in the face of growing complexity. Participant B sees future challenges such as social inequities, climate change, and technological disruption as requiring leaders who can make principled decisions that prioritize the common good over personal or political gain. They imagine organizations where shared values unite teams, guiding them through crises with empathy, transparency, and fairness. Participant B's vision of leadership is one that uplifts individuals and communities, reinforces the legitimacy of public institutions, and inspires trust through values-driven action. As they look ahead, Participant B is utilizing an appreciative approach that includes all relative stakeholder voices in a representation of the whole system. This develops an "appreciative space" that celebrates the past accomplishments and creates a vision for the future (Barrett & Fry, 2005, pp. 97–98). They remain committed to leading by example and cultivating environments where ethical leadership persists.

Throughout these interviews, it is clear that both Participant A and Participant B use an appreciative inquiry approach to drive their work. Working in the public sector to support a high-need population can Barrett and Fry (2005) share, "AI is a strength-based, capacity building approach to transforming human systems toward a shared image of their most positive potential."

THE COMPLEAT PUBLIC SECTOR ETHICAL LEADER

A compleat public sector ethical leader is defined by a commitment to principled leadership grounded in justice, equity, and public service. This leader possesses a clear moral compass and ethical autonomy, consistently choosing what is right, even when it invites criticism or comes at personal or political cost. At the core of their leadership is an unwavering dedication to uplift stakeholders, placing the needs and voices of constituents, especially the most vulnerable and marginalized, at the center of every decision. They lead with transparency and accountability, ensuring that their actions and policies are guided by fairness and social justice. Such leaders embrace diversity in all its forms, not only demographic but also diversity of thought, voice, and lived experience. They intentionally create inclusive spaces for dialogue, encourage participation in decision-making processes and fostering environments where every perspective is heard and respected.

By promoting equity, they address barriers to success and create opportunities for all individuals and communities to thrive. Compleat ethical leaders invest in organizational capacity by recognizing and amplifying both individual and collective strengths and highlighting successes. This appreciative approach strengthens collaboration and builds a culture of shared purpose and ethical clarity. Ultimately, the compleat public sector ethical leader leads with integrity and inspires trust, ensuring their effectiveness is measured by the positive impact they have on the communities they serve.

CONCLUSION

In 2023, approximately 15.8 million military Veterans lived in the United States, accounting for 6.1% of the civilian population aged 18 and older (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024). Although the Department of Veterans Affairs was established in 1930 to centralize the care and

support of Veterans, careers in this field are not widely known, even within public administration. I feel fortunate to have connected with two leaders in Veteran support and to have learned about the ethical frameworks that guide their work. Though I have known each of these leaders professionally for years, I was surprised by how their motivation and guiding principles were so similar.

As a military spouse and civilian, I had long assumed that Veterans are primarily motivated to help fellow Veterans. However, through my conversation with Participant A, I came to understand that their enduring commitment to service is rooted not only in national duty but also in a deep sense of responsibility to their local community. Their moral duty as a public administrator is so strong that I believe they will continue to find ways to serve, potentially at higher levels of government. In Participant B's case, it was especially meaningful to discover that although they are not a Veteran themselves, they possess a profound sense of public service and duty to those who have served, something I deeply relate to. While I had a longer professional career before entering the field of Veteran support, both Participant B and I found that once we began serving the 6% of the population who are Veterans, it became a calling. This shared motivation – experienced by Participant A, Participant B and myself – has driven us to grow as public administrators to ensure we provide the highest level of support to this deserving community.

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