An Overview of Professionalism and Ethical Conduct within the South African Local Government Environment

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Abstract

The dearth of professionalism and ethical conduct are underlying challenges within South African municipalities. The Supreme law of the country, the South African Constitution in Chapter Section 195 (1), outlines one of the basic values and principles governing public administration: "a high standard of professional ethics which must be promoted and maintained". Ethical conduct is a phenomenon that clearly distinguishes between good and unacceptable behaviour and put into practice what is right, that is, a set of good morals and value system which are generally recognized. Ethics means what is good and bad, what is acceptable or unacceptable, and is interrelated with people's set of values. Public value entails three essential aspects: services, honesty, and social outcome. Professionalism is the fundamental necessity to achieve these essential aspects of public value. It is a prerequisite for a professional public manager by virtue of his or her to be able to create public value. The significant quality of a professional public manager entails trust, competency, accountability, self-regulation, self-awareness, self-confidence, and differentiated expertise in his/her field and duties. The prerequisites for professionalism within municipalities consist of an increased emphasis on enhanced customer-centric; modern technologies; value for money in service delivery, monitoring, evaluation, and reporting. Public sector entities will embrace professionalism regarding how they execute their daily tasks. Municipal service provision is often negatively impacted by alleged unethical conduct, corrupt activities, and embezzlement. These characteristics are used as yardsticks to determine whether municipal administration is a profession or not. The study's main objective is to analyze the role of professionalism and ethical conduct in enhancing service delivery and curtailing corruption. The study seeks to establish the professional role of municipal managers and councillors in promoting professionalism and ethical conduct. Considering this, the study employed conceptual methodology.

Keywords: *Professionalism; Ethics; Local Government; Municipality; Councillors; And Manager*

1. Introduction

The prerequisites for professionalism within South African municipalities consist of an increased emphasis on enhanced customer-centric focus; modern technologies; value for money in service delivery, and transparent reporting of outcomes. Alternatively, the situation could be addressed through the design and implementation of more systematic monitoring and evaluation, and reporting systems to evaluate individual as well as organizational performance according to different policy frameworks, government programs, and projects, such as the In-Year Management, Monitoring, and Reporting System for Local Government (IYM) to ascertain sound financial practices (Kroukamp and Cloete,2018).

The Local Government Legislative Frameworks such as the Municipal Management Finance Act 2003 and Public Finance Management Act have not provided adequate universal cure in solving the fundamental problems of professionalism, poor performance, inadequate accountability, and transparency, and the lethargy to the provision of service in the country. At the centreline of these unprofessional placements is the debilitated political process with an encompassing influence on public administration (Okafor and Onuigbo,2015).

Jusoh,Sami, Nor, Irfan, Irum, Qureshi, and Ishfag (2018) accentuate the fact that the professionalism of public managers forced them to get differentiated expertise that capacitated them to use knowledge and capabilities to render better services and establish public trust in government departments. Professional public managers are wired to be competent and how to react wisely to complex situations. This expertise is not only derived from practical experiences and skills but also consists of behavioural skills that force professional public managers to interact and deal with the members of the public appropriately and correctly. They cultivate the skills to act, speak, and dress professionally, although they remain strict about these skills when they do not deal with the public. Professionalism directs them on how to carry out themselves in complex situations and adhere to processes of professional practices precisely and efficiently. Professionalism needs a strong commitment from public managers to act in the best public interest. It is mandatory for professionals to groom junior public managers and ordinary members of the public focusing on a common set of organizational objectives. It is pointed out that professionalism is a significant phenomenon that does not align itself with knowledge but is a vast and comprehensive necessity like behaving respectfully and following the rules and regulations. The behaviour of professional managers should be guided by the spirit of doing everything in the public interest. Their decisions are not diverted by short-term pressure, and they tackle such situations skilfully and professionally to save the organization's interest and integrity.

2. Methodology

The study used a conceptual approach relying heavily on secondary data. The methodology adopted by the study is qualitative research methodology with specific. The secondary data used in the study were gathered from academic electronic sources, legislation, journal articles, theses, dissertations, and conference proceedings. The sources used were those related to professionalism and ethical conduct within the local government environment of South Africa.

3. Literature Review of the Literature
3.1 The Concept of Professionalism

Kroukamp and Cloete (2018) assert that professionalism consists of six elements which are a purposeful cognizance of distinguishing, shared qualities between a group of people, based on the clear-cut written knowledge base, the commitment to apply this knowledge for social good, according to a

strictly adhered to code of ethics and conduct, crafted within an institutional structure of sorts, and the formal recognition of excellent performance. Public sector professionalism is the overall value that encloses all other values that guide the public sector. Public service professionals accept the concept that those who join the public sector need to be infused with shared values and trained in basic skills to carry out professionally their official duties. Commendatory to this process is the requirement to create management structures to ascertain that a public service ethos and competence are achieved. This means strict quality control to ensure compliance with the professional standards shared in such groups.

Okafor and Onuigbo (2015) avow that professionalism is derived from the inclination of a 'profession' and represents the standard of practice. A profession entails the application of a skill based on theoretical knowledge; intensive training in recognized educational institutions; organization into a professional association; the existence of a code of conduct enforced by a statutory body and commitment to one's work as a calling.

Okafor and Onuigbo (2015) further outline the following attributes of professionalism.

- A competent, professional, development-oriented, public-spirited, and client-focused civil service capable of responding effectively and swiftly to the needs of the public.
- A public sector with the value system of political neutrality, impartiality, integrity, loyalty, transparency, professionalism, and accountability.
- A public sector that is led by equity, where things are done the right way based on abiding by rules and regulations but with flexibility for discretion, which should be exercised in the public interest.
- Establishment of a suitable environment where public officials are ascertained of protection and job security in the faithful discharge of their duties and responsibilities; and
- A sustainably well-remunerated and creative public sector

3.1.1 Challenges to Professionalism

A range of factors that obstruct the professionalization of public human resources management and ethics in the country are identified by The South African Local Government Association (SALGA). The historical background of the SALGA initiatives to ameliorate the professionalism of municipalities in South Africa can be summarised as follows:

The 1996 South African Constitution made provisions for an innovative approach to governance by introducing concepts such as cooperative governance and by making provisions for autonomous spheres as opposed to levels or tiers of government. Examples of legislative frameworks and regulations that were specifically enacted for the local government sphere were, *inter alia,* the Intergovernmental Relations Framework Act, 2005, the Local Government Municipal Systems Amendment Bill, 2011, and the Local Government: Municipal Finance Management Act (MFMA) in 2003, and the comprehensive LGTAS in 2009. The New Economic Growth Path (NGP) was launched at the national level in 2010, and then there was the NDP – 2030.

- The latter two have implications for local government as well as the Municipal Intervention Plan: 2014 to 2019 that brings together the goals of each piece of legislation to meet the basic demands of all citizens by reducing unnecessary government expenditure, releasing resources for productive investment, and strengthening the role of local government in terms of improved service delivery (Kroukamp and Cloete 2018: 68-69).

According to Kroukamp and Cloete (2018), inadequate synergy caused weak coordination between various spheres, levels, and departments of government, which had a negative impact on the provision of services and development with specific reference to the provision of housing, water, and sanitation, as well as electricity.

Despite the high unemployment rate in South Africa, there are 30,000 vacancies at all levels of government, including the local level. In addition to that, leadership instability, poor performance management, and inadequate internal control measure have exacerbated the situation.

The African National Congress 's Cadre Deployment and Development policy has also exacerbated corruption in the form of fraud, unprocedural awarding of tenders political deployment, nepotism, cronyism, patronage, money laundering, and price collusion. At the Municipalities level, corrupt practices also entail abuse of mayoral funds, unauthorized transfers of municipal money to outsiders, favouritism in procurement processes, the payment of bribes to secure services, the abuse of travel allowances, fictitious tenders, non-payment of municipal services by councillors, using municipal facilities for party-political or personal purposes, employing individuals as general workers without advertising the posts, and irregular performance bonuses.

Jabarndhan (2022) asserts that currently both politically appointed and career public servants are viewed very sceptically by the public. The ongoing cases of maladministration within the public sector have opened the sector to greater public scrutiny. Public officials are perceived as corrupt lot who either enrich themselves or who aid or abet political appointees in malfeasance and corruption. South Africa embraced a new model of public administration post-1994. The model saw a combination of "four conflicting models of administrative leadership by articulating political appointees with primitive public sector officials, agency specialists or technocrats, and corporatist managers. The Local Government: The Municipal Systems Amendment Act, 2011, and the Public Administration Bill, 2013 attempted to address the issue of political appointments by shifting the roles of political office bearers in appointments to heads of departments.

To normalize the administrative and political interface, the NDP: Vision 2030 identified the professionalization of the public service as a key attribute to enhance and promote democracy. The National School of Government (NSG) draft document states that a professional public service 'is one where people are recruited and promoted based on merit and potential, rather than connections or political allegiance. This requires rigorous and transparent recruitment mechanisms. However, the public service will not be effective if it is elitist and aloof. Public servants must have an in-depth understanding of the sections of society in which they work. Highly skilled public service personnel should also be representative of and connected to the communities it serves. '

Okafor and Onuigbo (2015) accentuate that the challenges to public administration professionalism globally remain audacious regardless of the existing policy and regulatory frameworks. These hindrances to professionalism are outlined below as follows:

- **Unethical Behaviours**

Ethical behaviour is viewed as a set of principles, often defined as a code or system that acts as a guide to good conduct. Unethical behaviour is, therefore, behaviour that does not comply with codes of ethics. The ethics of the public sector are centred around the principles of fairness, transparency, responsibility, efficiency, and no conflict of interest. However, these conditions are lacking in the system due to the non-existence of an 'ethic infrastructure' or 'national integrity system'. Often there is the general acceptance of unethical behaviour (due to private gains) in cases of conflict with what is right in the interest of all.

- **Corruption**

Corruption is a general case in the world. Corruption is defined as 'behaviours that deviate from the formal duties of a public role due to private gains'. The prevalence of corruption is high in the world. This condition is necessitated by a complex web of socio-economic factors arising from a general

breakdown of law and order. When survival becomes the paramount value, corruption can become a way of life.

- **Unprofessional Politics**

Okafor and Onuigbo(2015) describe unprofessional politics as criminal politics. Politics worldwide is not fairly played. The emerging issues of clientelism, prebendalism, and patrimonialism undoubtedly weigh on behaviours in public service.

- **Poor Working Conditions**

It is a norm that, the working conditions and environment of service in the public sector compared to the private sector practices and elsewhere are very poor. These conditions include a reward system with specific reference to salaries, incentives, and other remunerations, career development programmes, proper grading systems, pension schemes, security of tenure, etc. Where these basic conditions are poor, talking about professionalism and ethics seems like a luxury.

- **Unwillingness to Disclose Misconduct**

It is evident that people are reluctant to report unprofessional behaviour for corrective actions. The reluctance to divulge unprofessionalism and misconduct is regarded as fear of risking the personal-cost-ethical dilemma. The unwillingness to disclose misconduct emanates from inadequate protection measures by senior government officials.

3.2 The Mechanisms That Will Ensure Professionalism within the Public Sector

Jarbandhan (2022) outlines the mechanisms that will ensure professionalism within the public sector in detail as follows:

3.2.1 Ethics Recruitment

Managing the unethical behaviour of public officials is costly and consumes time. In addition to that, the provision of services suffers if public officials are granted leave. In 2021, it was stated that approximately 6 334 public officials in South Africa were suspended awaiting disciplinary hearings, with an estimated cost of R100 million of the taxpayer 's money. It is very crucial to ensure that the recruitment processes are aligned with ethical considerations to determine the ethical foundation of candidates entering the public sector environment. Jarbandhan (2022) further indicates that the recruitment process is underpinned by the following key questions:

- To what extent are the new recruits or employees tested to ascertain a proper foundation in ethically based decision-making?
- If testing done, verbal in nature, online, or, handwritten?
- Is there the existence of a relationship between the age of recruits/new employees and ethics violations?
- What is the size of the entity?
- Is there a mentor assigned to the new recruits or employees? If yes, did these employees display any incidents of less or more ethics-based violations?"

Meritocratic recruitment, especially in the senior management service, is very significant to support a professional public sector. It is common practice to use psychometric tests for example countries such as Russia, Poland, and the United States make it mandatory for new recruits to write psychometric tests to uncover the candidate's work ethic and ethical assumptions.

3.2.2 Enforcing a Code of Ethics

It is very important to conduct skills audits on a regular basis because professionalism relates to skills and competencies, values and norms, a code of conduct, and meritocracy. The fact that there is a code of conduct for the public sector, the codes of ethics 'are a set of principles and standards that serve as guide norms for the behaviour of public servants. Generally, they consist of ethical values and principles that are the foundation of the institution they govern, recommend conduct, and usually have a debatable character below to that of the law." Furthermore, the Organisation for Economic and Cooperative Development (OECD) Toolkit for Managing Conflict of Interests in the Public Sector refers to the ethics code in relation to conflict of interest. The basic code of ethics includes the following.

- Serving the public interest.
- Transparency and accountability.
- Integrity.
- Legitimacy.
- Fairness.
- Responsiveness; and
- Efficiency and effectiveness.

The South African Constitution of 1996 and the National Development Plan (NDP) call for high standards of professional ethics. The South African Institute of Chartered Accountants (SAICA) (2017) and the National School of Government (NSG) Draft Framework on Professionalism distinguishes between a 'code of conduct' and a code of ethics. A code of conduct and a code of ethics are two distinct documents. A code of conduct deals with the organization's broad moral standards and the code of ethics mandates employees how to apply those standards daily at their workplace. It is evident that a code of ethics will strengthen professionalism within the South African public sector environment. According to SAICA mandatory ethics training must be part of an orientation programme and all public officials should receive ethics training to combat unethical behaviour.

3.2.3 Cadre Deployment

There is a need to train and capacitate cadres in ethical service delivery prior to their deployment in critical and strategic public sector posts. Particularly where service delivery is deemed to be a priority more than personal or party interests. The skills audit must be conducted prior to the deployment of cadres to ensure the effective implementation of cadre deployment. The cadres must be trained and capacitated in ethics; they need to be screened; they need to embrace an ethos of serving the public without fear or favour; and be loyal and disciplined. Furthermore, if cadres are deployed, they need to manage their conflicts of interest by ensuring whom they serve, the political party or the public. If cadre deployment is perceived as suspicious and impact negatively on the personal realm of the official public trust and credibility can be eroded. The erosion of public trust compromises the calling to serve the public. As such, public trust must always be protected. Therefore, there is a need to identify such, it is mandatory for public officials to identify conflicting situations and act in the best interest of the citizenry.

3.2.4 Factors That Can Enhance Professionalism and Ethics in the Public Sector

Mle(2012) outlines the factors that encourage ethical conduct and professionalism in the public sector as follows:

- Capacity building and training in basic skills to carry out official duties. The training must entail public finance management so that public servants can manage their own finances efficiently and effectively.

- The introduction of a career system based on meritocratic appointments. In the statement of the African National Congress in 2010, it was stated that 'the process of building a new public sector forms part of the major tasks of creating a development state. In the statement, the President further warns those placed in positions of responsibility that are not performing according to the set standards of performance, either through incapacity or reluctance, that they will be dealt with accordingly.
- Well-articulated and fair human resource policy framework on remuneration, reward system, and service, training, and development programmes should be implemented.
- Affirmation and recognition of good work through incentives and correction of poor performance, thus nurturing professionalism and pride,
- There is a need to legalise the Code of Conduct and *Batho Pel*e principles and these will then be enforced against misconduct ranging from unethical to criminal acts. Strengthening the human resource capacity to investigate unethical behaviour in departments. The Public Service Commission (PSC) reported that in KwaZulu-Natal not enough resources were available to create posts and employ staff for this calibre.
- Cessation of dual employment. The PSC has noted that some public servants also serve as part-time councillors, and this poses a threat to   honesty, especially in bidding.
- Flawless political leadership and political desire are required to inculcate ethics and professionalism, because sometimes problems start from the top and pervade the institution. Junior officials take advantage of such situations.

These factors may encourage a public sector that adapts to the impacts of globalisation to achieve better economic performance through promoting investment and trade.

3.3 Ethics and Ethical Leadership within the Public Sector Environment

Lekubu and Sibanda (2021) state that *ethics* "is a system of moral principles linked to that to that branch of philosophy that addresses the values of human conduct, pertaining to the correctness or wrongness of specific actions". Obviously in this definition is that ethics "contribute towards the basic principles of correct behaviour undertaken based on rules of conduct. The association between ethics and corruption is perceived as significant for achieving excellent public service and administration.

3.3.1 Ethics of Leadership

Mbandlwa (2021:7-11) encapsulates that ethics in leadership is a worldwide fundamental problem that negatively impact on the provision of services. This is affected by changes in the entire environment of public services, which articulate mobility, privatization, and the devolution of power. It is evident that, the workplace of contemporary public service is in constant variability, causing apprehension and uncertainty, but also providing opportunities and challenges. Provision of public service delivery include government and private service providers in the new public administration. The need and ultimatum for organizational reform and new knowledge production within the public sector governance have increased in recent years, which also highlighted the competency of employees at various government levels. Supervisory and managerial leaders in administrations need to apply a pre-emptive strategy that strengthen an effective government ethos and builds management capability. However, executive management does not have complete control over the leadership ethics of service providers. Morals and values, which are the founding attributes and qualities of ethics, must be followed closely by public officials to embrace good governance. Moreover, ethical conduct should be a good guideline for selecting relevant service providers. Leadership ethics, therefore, plays a significant role in the provision of public services.

Ethical leadership is activities of leaders to strengthen an environment and culture characterized by morals and an ethos of service. Many times, ethical breaks in organizations are due to people who intentionally behave in an unbecoming manner or act unethically. Instead, research indicates that the environment and culture influence the ethical behaviour of individuals in their workplace. Employees tend to adjust their own ethical orientations to the behaviour they observe among leaders in their organization. Leaders must take innovative steps to strengthen an ethical environment and culture in the public sector institutions. Adherence to ethical rules and procedures is essential for effective and efficient administration pertaining to the provision of services. Excellent corporate governance requires that the Municipal Council promote accountability for building and supporting an ethical corporate culture within the Municipality. Such a culture entails both formal and informal cultural systems. A cultural method for governing and managing the ethics of the municipality would ascertain those ethical principles allow both formal and informal cultural attributes. Leadership ethics and an understanding of government policies play a notable rolent role in terms of the employees performance, which informs the attitude of the public. The moral choices of leaders informed the path of ethical conduct they choose to follow, which also has an impact on service delivery. Organizational success depends on the ethical temperament of the leaders of each institution (Mbandlwa,2021:7-11).

Lekubu and Sibanda (2021) assert that ethical leadership is forms part of the broader field of leadership that touches upon many theoretical bases of leadership. A study conducted on ethical leadership in the context of corporate governance identified certain qualities of ethical leadership, which included accountability, ethical decision making and responsiveness by acting with immediate effect to address dilemmas; integrity, entailing honesty in disclosure of information to board members and shareholders; fairness; transparency and disclosure; and responsibility. It is evident that there is an urgent need for ethical leadership 'in organizations and in society if we truly want to achieve the common good of human welfare at the personal, organizational, and societal levels. Though the sustenance of ethical leadership has been doubted, the debate is that for any organization to succeed, it must embrace ethical leadership. Ethical leaders will not hesitate to condemn acts of corruption, such as the Great Bank Heist in South Africa, for the sake of good governance. Good governance is needed to combat corruption, and effective leadership is required to have good governance. It is also evident that ethical leadership is required to resist abuse of entrusted power for individualistic gain, as well as potential interference, and to protect the operational independence of anticorruption agencies, thus allowing good governance. Ethical leadership is demonstrated by integrity, competence, responsibility, accountability, fairness, and transparency. It, therefore, includes anticipating and preventing, or at least avoiding, the negative consequences of corruption and corrupt practices in the public sector and government in general. Furthermore, it entails being both a moral person and a moral manager.

3.3.2 Mechanisms to Cultivate a New Ethical Culture within the South African Public Service and Administration

The King IV Code is very significant as it advocates for ethical leadership. The code does not only seek to promote corporate governance as integral to running an organization. It also seeks to deliver governance outcomes such as ethical culture, good performance, effective control, and legitimacy. Ethical leadership as summarised in the King IV report is characterized by the principles of integrity, competence, responsibility, accountability, fairness, and transparency, considering the consequences of an organization's activities and outputs of an organization on the economy, society, the environment, and the capital it uses and affects. These values are embedded in the King IV Code, and they resonate well with Section 195 of the Constitution, which makes provision for the public administration to be governed by democratic principles and values. Historically South Africa, is desperately in need of incorruptible ethical and professional leaders. Section 195(1)(a) of the Constitution states that "a high standard of professional ethics must be promoted and maintained" in public administration in general. In addition, Section 20(t) of the Public Service Act of 1994 requires employees appointed in terms of the Public Service Act to be

accountable and to comply with the prescribed code of conduct by promoting faultless conduct. Public Service Commission (PSC) is one of the institutions that support democracy, ethics, and governance measures, particularly in the public sector, and it is mandated to promote a high standard of professional ethics in the public service (Lekubu and Sibanda,2021).

Mabunda (2020) accentuates that the goal of an ethics code is to identify and combat criminal activities while promoting ethical standards and values of an organization. Critical decisions are made daily regarding how to use available resources. The ethical peremptory is to ensure that resources are used efficiently and effectively for the municipality and the community. Ethical codes support a culture of transparency, trust, integrity, and good business practices. A positive effect on the surroundings of the employees creates an atmosphere of decision making that fosters maintained ethics codes enhance effectiveness, fosters a positive ethical culture, increases awareness of the function and its activities, and sharpens the corporate focus on risk management. The Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA) introduced the Public Sector Integrity Management Framework, whose purpose was to strengthen measures and standards to manage integrity and promote ethical conduct in the public service. This framework makes provisions for managing unethical conduct that can arise due to financial interests, gifts, hospitality and other benefits, post-public employment, and remunerative work outside the public service. is intended to establish the position of 'fraud and corruption', as well as to reinforce existing systems, policies, procedures, rules, and regulations of the municipality aimed at deterring, preventing, detecting, reacting to, and reducing the impact of fraud and corruption, where such dishonest activities subsist. A means by which employees can raise concerns with the appropriate line management or specifically appointed person, where they have reasonable grounds for believing that there is fraud and corruption.

3.3.3 Ethics in the South African Public Sector

According to Shava and Mazenda (2021), the cases of corruption which dominated the Zondo and Mkogoro Commissions confirm the seriousness to which unethical conduct was experienced in South African Public Administration. Most importantly is the Gupta family corruption scandal, involving former President Jacob Zuma and most politicians who were the members of the cabinet. This explicitly demonstrated the violation of ethics in the country. In spite of the fact that hearing was disputed, and all parties denied wrongdoing, researchers and commentators were unable to keep quiet as the media throughout the country depicted this as 'state capture'. Government officials in their execution of public duties, it is mandatory for officials to uphold sound ethical conduct, which is essential to enhance public service delivery in a developmental state. In South African public administration, public officials have a significant role in executing the development mandate of the public sector. As good stewards of the people, when exercising their roles, public officials can implement discretionary powers in terms of policymaking to ensure that every action they undertake benefits the public. Public officials are privileged to access both private and public information about government actions which they should utilize responsibly to enhance the lives of the citizenry and protect their rights toward democratic development. The ethical challenges emanate when government officials fail to strike a balance between their work and their individualistic interest when executing public duties. Ethics, therefore, plays a significant watchdog role to ascertain those public officials do not digress from the primary mandate of serving the public in transparency and accountability. The difference between what is right and wrong is the privilege of public officials in the performance of public duties. Given such a clear demarcation and understanding of their roles assist public administration succeed in South Africa for the benefit of the citizenry which is the end-users of public goods and services. It should be reiterated that in public administration, ethics potrays good governance, which every government department in South Africa should yearn towards. Embracing ethics is key for public office bearers because this is consistent with Section 195 of the Constitution.

3.4 The Relationship between Professionalism and Ethics within the Public Sector

Mantzaris, Pillay, and Jarbandan (2022) asserts that ethics as a philosophical foundation of humanity and its historical background throughout the centuries is grounded in in the writings of several theorists such as Aristotle who encapsulate 'Ethics is the science that studies the supreme good for men and is rooted in politics'. Historically, philosophers and thinkers have debated that no human being is born corrupt, and that human thoughts, relationships, and actions determine the course of human history. Different aspects such as family relationships, education, state and society, economy, and market forces craft human ideas, relationships, behaviour, attitudes, and action at all societal levels. In congruent with this, the materialist debate and comprehension that characterized Karl Marx's thoughts indicate that human behaviour is basically determined by existing historical and social perspectives

Ethics and ethical behaviour within a public sector space are based on various realities that are aligned, either directly or indirectly, with the fundamental attributes outlined, debated, and dissected by historical philosophers. Inevitably, historical, political, economic, functional, and systemic social changes have created a complicated, sophisticated, and dynamic work environment.

The most significant element connected to public sector ethics is linked with the individual characteristics of the office administrator or politician. Significantly, these qualities are aligned with their upbringing, family roots, history, socialization, knowledge, personality traits, education level, control locus, as well as past and present ideological, political, and spiritual upbringing. It also has a direct bearing on organizational relationships with the political and administrative leadership and management as well as with co-workers.

Mantzaris et al., (2022) further assert that professionalism in all social, institutional, and organizational contexts with specific reference to in the public service is determined and measured by honesty, common trust, knowledge, ethical behaviour, competence, commitment, collaboration, collegiality, contribution, conscience, and continuity. In addition to that, knowledge, as well as ethical conscience and behaviour, form the cornerstone of moral reasoning and the social basis of a corruption-free public sector. It is impossible for professionalism to exist without a clear moral path. Government officials must be able to differentiate between right and wrong to facilitate efficient and effective ethical state organizations. Public sector professionalism is interconnected to general and specialized knowledge of corrupt activities. Within this perspective, it is significant analyse situations with a degree of professionalism to eradicate employee-related fraud and corruption with specific reference to nepotism, counterfeit educational qualifications, overtime abuse, irregular loans and promotions, misappropriation of assets, misclassified or fictitious expenses, sales schemes such as diversion of payments, invoice kickbacks, credit notes, and refunds and creditors' fraud such as shell companies, fraudulent disbursements or payments and inflated billing schemes.

It is evident that every professional individual within a public organization has become an integral part of the organisation, as they are responsible for a specific operational and knowledge field based on mandates, understanding, experience, and research. In this regard, special knowledge is developed in a specific occupational field, leading to the acquisition of the relevant skills. In many cases, refining existing knowledge becomes a prerequisite in every professional field. This is done by strengthening existing formal technical or academic education. This situation is linked basically, but not exclusively, with the demands of a particular organizational position or the existing standards of competency demanded by organizational leadership. Precipitous professionalism in the public sector is fundamentally grounded in the government official servanthood knowledge and understanding of the truths and realities of the community they serve. Therefore, an understanding of political and social culture, history and current realities and activities within the community is important because, in most cases, a lack of understanding of existing public values will lead to failure (Mantzaris et al.,2022).

The existence of a continuous professional and ethical culture should form the basis of any effort against immoral and corrupt public sector conduct. If professionalism is founded on integrity, accountability, skills, competence, and a belief in community values can create an enabling environment for the continuous improvement of organizational and institutional strategies to eradicate corruption. Within this context, highly professional and ethical conduct, coupled with ethical public sector leadership and administrators, play a significant role in eradicating corruption within local government (Mantzaris et al.,2022).

3.5 The Advantages of Professionalism and Ethical Conduct within Local Government in South Africa

Mafunisa (2018) outlines the advantages of the adoption of professionalization by local government institutions as follows:

- It is evident that the status of working within the local government sector as a profession will be enhanced, and therefore, municipalities will be better capacitated to attract the talents of necessary work professionals through the professionalisation of local government.
- Qualified professionals can be identified and employed in strategic an senior positions within local government, which will lead to municipalities being perceived by the public as upholding certain professional standards and encouraging staff to develop themselves on an ongoing basis through certification and accreditation.
- The citizenry will benefit from adequate municipal service provision and the local government personnel will also benefit in fulfilling their duties through the enforcement of codes of conduct and ethics within local government.
- The professional sanctioning of noncompliance by any staff member with stipulated codes of ethics and conduct. This can help ensure that checks against unprofessional behaviour by staff within this profession are properly instituted and observed.

According to Mafunisa (2018), the advantage of the Code of Conduct for government officials in the South African Public Sector is to act as a guide to public servants as to what is expected of them from an ethical point of view, both as individuals and in their relationship with the legislatures and the executive, colleagues, and members of the public. Obviously, the Code expects public servants to strengthen sound, efficient, effective, transparent, and accountable administration and to be honest and accountable in dealing with public funds and use the property of the public service and other resources effectively, efficiently, and only for official purposes. The primary objective of the Code is to promote credible conduct. Public officials are guilty of misconduct in terms of Section 20(t) of the *Public Service Act*, 1994 (Proclamation 103 of 1994), if they fail to comply with any provisions of the Act. As such, they will be dealt with in accordance with the relevant sections of the Act. The Code of Conduct contributes to developing acceptable ethics and accountability in public officials. The reason for this is that public officials will endeavour to perform their duties effectively and efficiently so as not to avoid violating the provisions of the Code of Conduct and will be punished for it.

Conclusions

The study examined professionalism and ethical leadership within the South African local government environment. The study focused on the concept of professionalism, the remedies that will ascertain professionalism within the public service, the factors that may ameliorate professionalism and ethics within the public sector, Ethics and ethical leadership within the public sector environment, mechanisms that cultivate a differentiated ethical culture within the South African public service and administration, the relationship between professionalism and ethical conduct and the advantages of

professionalism and ethical conduct within local government in South Africa. The exposition given above makes it loud and clear that, generally, local government in South Africa does not demonstrate the expected levels of professionalism and ethical conduct due to the cases of maladministration, corruption, the inefficiency and ineffectiveness of service delivery, the obligatory filling of posts in local government, and incompetence. Regardless the formation of legislative framework and regulatory provisions to create an environment conducive to strengthening the mandate to behave professionally, not all South African municipalities are aligned to the expectations. As a result of problematic political and administrative interfaces and political interference, inadequate accountability, dysfunctional caucuses, unsatisfactory labour relations, weak public participation structures, and weak financial management, creating the belief that professionalism is not part and parcel of the nature of local government professionalism and ethical conduct, are negatively impacted. Most restructuring and capacitating strategies have been introduced to enhance the professionalization of municipalities in South Africa, with no success. Inadequate professionalism impact negatively on public trust and undermines the constitutional values and principles that underpin the public service. Initiatives for well-trained and capacitated public officials who can serve the public effectively and efficiently have grown over the years. It is evident that a good ethical culture can focus on the actions of members of the community. The study revealed that ethical behaviour and ethical codes can assist councillors and municipal officials to embrace professionalism, with reasonable justification of their discretion and moral autonomy in decision-making. Repeated ethical habits become inculcated in the individual and ingrained in the organization. Ethical culture contributes towards efficient and effective usage of resources and avoidance of unfruitful, unlawful expenditure as well as unauthorised expenditure.

It is evident that public servants are the backbone and heartbeat of the public service, but if this heartbeat is unethical and unprofessional, there will be no blood circulation and the public service will collapse. It is critical to craft strategies that will contribute towards the political will and ethical exemplary leadership, as senior public servants remain critical to the effective promotion of ethics and professionalism within the public sector environment.

Recommendations

The South African Government is faced with multiple challenges which are both simple and complex, relating to unethical and unprofessional behaviour. Research tends to focus excessively on symptoms so that the resulting recommendations place too much emphasis on the initial evidence of something that has gone wrong rather than on the underlying root causes. The study recommends that the underlying root causes of unprofessionalism and unethical behaviour be analysed, assessed, identified, and resolved through monitoring, evaluation, and reporting.

To ensure that professionalism and ethical conduct within municipalities are inculcated, it is recommended that management within local government is capacitated on management principles for them to manage resources effectively, economically, and efficiently. Management training and capacity building provided to senior municipal employees must include planning, organizing, leading, and controlling.

It is also recommended that leadership training include the qualities of a leader, leadership styles, and motivation theories. The municipality must ascertain that planning, organizational, communication, and coordination skills learned by the senior municipal employees in the learning or training environment must also be transferred and applied to the work environment to ensure professionalism.

The focal point of public administration professionals is good governance. This involves the application of the best ways to carry out public administration, the extent of implementing policies, and the competence to achieve public interests. The study recommends that efforts should, therefore, be made

to sustain democracy and good governance in the country. It is recommended that strong political will and institutional mechanisms be embraced to implement the policy and regulatory frameworks on public administration professionalism and ethical conduct. The study further recommends the implementation of consequence management and that law enforcement agencies must conduct a series of prosecutions for criminal activities resulting from unethical behaviour. It is also recommended that the government should introduce a program to regularly appraise employee performance.

It is recommended that ethical workshops and skills development training must be conducted on a regular basis to ensure that public servants have an in-depth understanding of professionalism and ethical behaviour within the public service environment. Finally, the study recommend that the Code of Conduct, *Batho Pele* principles, and other prescripts that encourage ethical behaviour and professionalism   be considered for promulgated as part of the legislative framework.

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