

## **Ethical leadership versus public service delivery in the context of the South African government.**

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### **Abstract**

Ethical leadership is a type of leadership that is ideal for any institution. Ethical leadership is lacking in Africa and south Africa is not an exception. Ethical leadership in many aspects globally is misconceptualized but this article focus on ethical leadership in the South African context. South Africa as a developing country has various aspects that seeks to effectively deliver public services and ethical leadership play a major role. South African leaders recently, mobilize public support using the ticket of corruption free and ethical leadership. Ethical leadership and corrupt free leaders does not guarantee effective public services. This article presents a view that leaders must showcase the leadership skills and a calling for leading people without expecting anything in return. Leaders must provide solutions for existing problems in the society. Ethical leadership and corrupt free must not be a standalone phenomenon that leaders use to mobilize public support, they must present their desire to provide public services and service excellence. The objective of this article is to show the difference between ethical leadership and public service delivery. There is a correlation between the two aspects and this article seeks to contribute in addressing the confusion between the two. The study found that most leaders in South Africa portray themselves as ethical leaders in public to gain more support from the public and voters. The study applied mixed research methodology and analyzed the existing data that is related to ethical leadership versus public service delivery.

**Keywords:** ethical leadership, corruption, service delivery, ethical behaviour, public support.

## Introduction

South Africa has a young democracy that is only 28 years old but it is already characterized by many corrupt elements. People are no longer excited about voting for their government representatives because of corruption. Most political parties in the country have identified unethical leadership as the cause of corruption in government. Because of this problem, politicians portray themselves as ethical leaders and corruption free leaders. This study is presenting a view that the ethical leadership card that is used by politicians when they look for support in communities is not equivalent to effective public service delivery. Leaders can be ethical and corruption free but still fail to deliver services to the people. Puiu (2015: 605) articulated factors that contribute in unethical behaviour in the public sector. He mentioned the following factors as the main factors that hinder the public services: bribery, nepotism and theft; conflict of interests; misuse of insider knowledge; use and abuse of confidential information for personal purposes; public responsibility and accountability; corruption; the influence of interest and pressure groups and so on. On the other hand Entwistle and Martin (2005: 235) define public service delivery as a mechanism to deliver the needs of the people. This is done through the different levels of government, national, provincial, and local levels. This paper therefore links the relationship between the two. Ethical behaviour must be characterized by the willingness to deliver services and understanding of what people need on the ground. Leaders can be corrupt and still be voted in by the people if they provide for the needs of the people.

This study addresses the perception that ethical leaders automatically translate to good leaders and effective public service delivery. Ethical leaders are good and needed in the public services but this does not necessarily mean the public will have access to their needs. Ethical leaders are leaders that don't steal public funds and put people first. They might not steal public funds and put people first but fail to deliver the services to the people. If people are given an opportunity to choose between ethical leaders who are absolutely clueless about public service delivery and unethical leaders who deliver the needs of the people, the people will choose the unethical leaders. Dion (2012) presents theories of ethical leadership but none of these theories link the importance of understanding the public service delivery. It is perceived that an ethical leader automatically understands public service delivery. Public service delivery cannot solely depend on leadership ethics. Understanding the community and their needs, understanding how to deliver the needs of the people, availability of leaders to communities, empathetic character, all these contribute significantly to public service delivery. Ethical leaders who are not available to the communities, who don't understand the needs of the communities, who don't understand public service

delivery can lose support from communities. Unethical leaders who understand public service delivery, available for the community, understand the needs of the people and deliver to the needs of the people can enjoy more support from the communities. The objective of this paper was to show the importance of understanding the needs of the people and the relationship between ethical leadership and public service delivery. The aim is to articulate the position of ethics in the public service delivery. Ethics in the public sector are crucial and significant but cannot outshine the importance of understanding the needs of the public. The availability of public servants when the public needs them the most plays a vital role and determine the relationship between the public and leaders. Leaders in the public office can hold high ethics but fail to avail themselves when communities need them and that will translate to ineffective public service delivery. In South Africa, people have lost hope because those who claim to be corrupt free are not visible in their constituencies. Electorate in 2021 decided to hold their power of voting because their needs were not addressed. Leaders came with the same promises they have been making in the past 28 years (Peté, 2021: 247).

### **Research methodology**

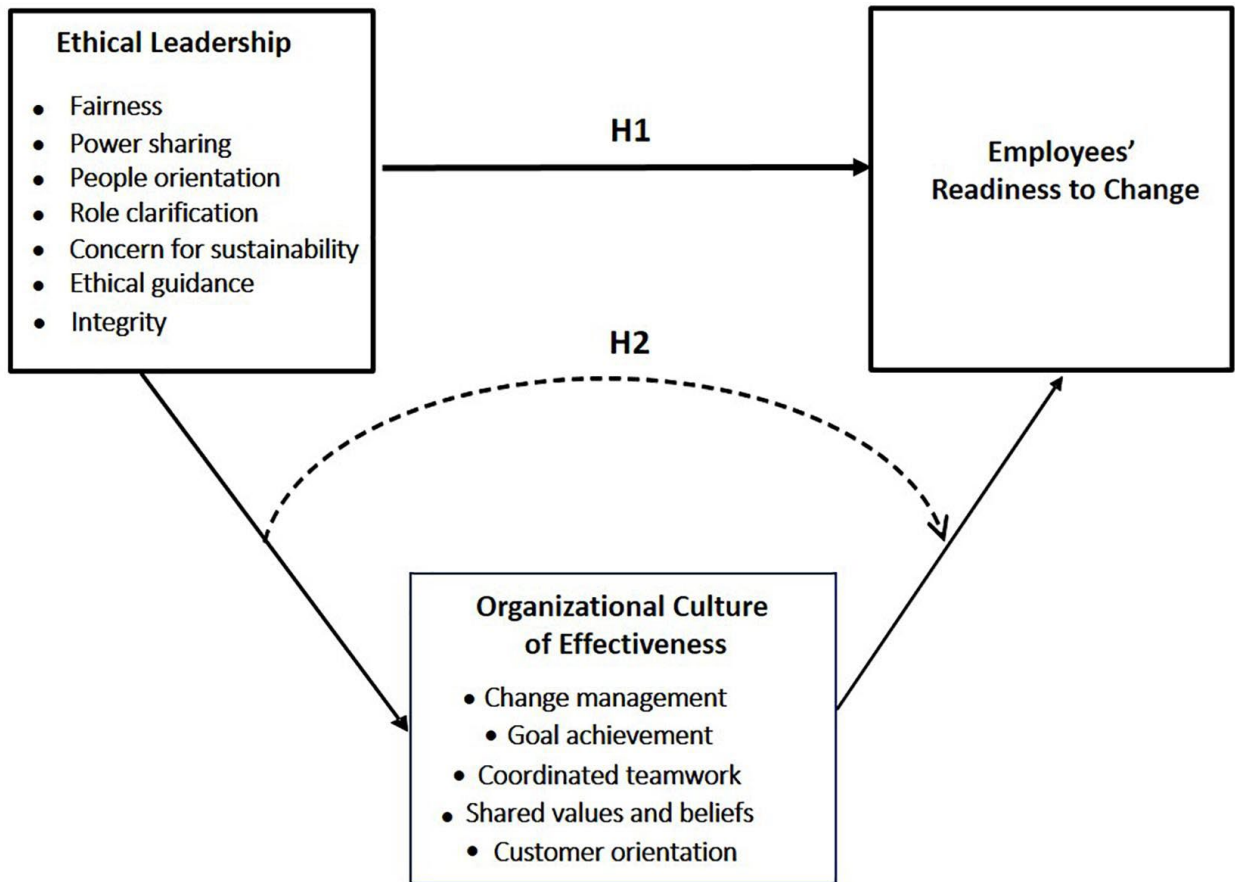
This study applied two research designs or research methodology, Meta-analysis and Systematic review. Meta-analysis is the combination of data from different research studies either empirical or theoretical studies. The author based the findings on the data that has been collected for previous studies. The Systematic review is evaluation and assessment of the previous studies. This includes the findings of previous studies (Keene, Heslop, Sabesan and Glass, 2019). This study collected data from the existing literature. This study used qualitative data that was collected and analyzed in other studies. The author based the findings on existing data. It was important for the researcher to look at what previous studies say about ethical leadership and public service delivery. Based on these findings, the author of this article then applied Meta-analysis and Systematic review. The data was enough for the author to make new contributions in the body of knowledge.

### **Results and findings**

Ethics, norms, values, good behaviour all contribute in how leaders lead the community. Ethics are not isolated from the societal values. Ethics decay is caused by the decline in embracing family values, societal values, and expected community behaviour and standards. Political leaders, government officials or any public servants do not come from the island or desert but they come from the communities. Communities

no longer hold values that shape the type of leadership that is needed by the South African government. Corruption is deep rooted in the South African communities. Some public services that are supposed to be free are mainly accessible for people who can afford to pay a bribe. This study found that leaders had identified this problem in societies. Most leaders are focusing on ensuring that ethics are at the centre of government leaders. Good governance, understanding of government operations, understanding the needs of the people and knowing how to deliver the needs of the people must be part of the plan to produce ethical leaders (Göçen, 2021: 38).

**Figure 1:** ethics and other aspects that lead to effective public services



**Source:** Dina Metwally, 2019.

The above figure1, shows that the leadership ethics must be supported by the readiness to change, and understanding of the organizational culture. For the society to enjoy effective public service delivery, ethics must be supported by visionary ideas and leaders who do not talk more and do less. Leaders that are needed by the South African government are the type of leaders that bring change to the society. Government in South Africa operate in a dynamic and competitive environment they are in a demand to change the economic status quo. People are poor they live in deep poverty they rely on government to change their economic situation. Leadership ethics alone cannot change the status quo or improve the economic conditions of the society. The study found that the attitude of government leaders towards change management plays a major role in public service delivery. Leaders that do not have an ability to adjust their attitudes towards the people are likely to resist change even if they have good leadership ethics. Inability to change the attitude and behaviour lead to the inability to commit to the government programme to improve the lives of the people. For government to successfully deliver the services to the people it requires skilled people who have a right mentality to change the lives of the people (Metwally, Ruiz-Palomino, Metwally and Gartzia, 2019: 2493).

The organizational change and effective public service delivery can be achieved if all government leaders and employees show an individual readiness to bring change. This includes the change of beliefs and attitudes of government leaders and employees. Readiness to change can be attributed to the personal capacity of government leaders. Some leaders do not have capacity to bring any new ideas in government but implement what has been initiated by their predecessors. Lack of effort by leaders to bring change in communities has been identified as a problem. Public sectors in the world are collectively the biggest service provider that impact the lives of millions if not billions of people. For governments to remain relevant and deliver according to the needs of the people, there are certain important aspects. Aspects such as understanding customers, connecting layers of government, building capacity, and create a conducive environment for businesses to grow and create employment opportunities (Goel, Nelson and Goel, 2021: 504).

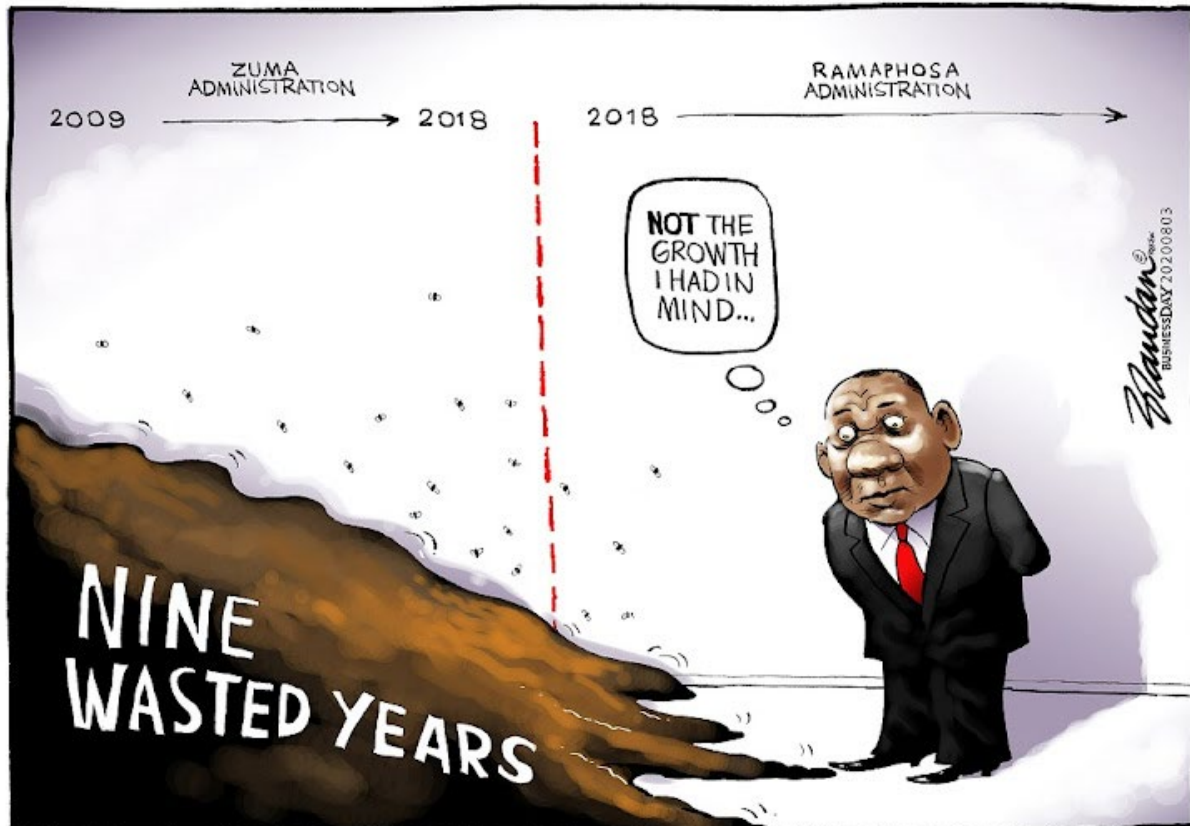
Challenges that are facing public sector in South Africa are not exclusively affecting South Africa. The study found that public sectors globally face the common set of challenges. Challenges may be the same or similar in all countries but the way they are confronted matters the most. The results of dealing with challenges are based on the type of leadership each government have. Customer service is at the centre of the public service delivery. Customer service must be aligned with ethical leadership and the ethical leadership without customer service is not effective. This could improve the efficiency and effectiveness

of public service delivery. This will also ensure that there is value for money and improve the quality of public services.

The study argued that ethical leadership does not automatically translate to customer satisfaction. Meeting customer satisfaction require a lot of commitment from government leaders and government employees. Healthy and corrupt free relationship between government and the private sector strengthen the public service delivery. The private sector leadership model can solve the public service delivery challenges if used in a manner that could best suit the government mandate and policies. This has not been the focus of government leaders in South Africa for the past decade. The focus of many leaders has been to portray themselves as corrupt free leaders with no plan or model that could best speed up the public service delivery. Good ethics has been used as a ticket to win the hearts and votes of the people in South Africa. No leader has introduced public sector reform programmes that could change the demographics of the country. The majority of people in the country are living in poverty and seriously marginalized. Government must break the constraints and create new opportunities for the people who have lost hope. This will meet the demands of the people and their expectations. Amongst the expectations of the people is the transformation of the economy. People believe the government can change their economic status. Government leaders need to redefine their role and integrate the government activities with the private sector (Kuldosheva, 2021).

The study further found that leaders in South Africa whether perceived as ethical leaders or unethical leaders benefit themselves more than what they do to benefit the general public. The ruling political party in south Africa have a norm of blaming leaders for failures in government. New leaders blame their predecessors for the government weaknesses even for the weaknesses of government policies. They focus on unethical conduct of former leaders. The ruling party in South Africa do not have new leaders or never had new leaders but they recycle leaders continuously. For them, people believe in individuals but when those particular individuals do not deliver the needs of the people they present a new individual with a different promise. Changing the jockey on a dead horse could not lead to winning the race. The problem in the country could not be resolved by few individuals or by one political party but it requires an attention of the entire communities. The current leadership was able to at least win the votes of the people in the national and provincial government elections through the ticket of corruption free. There was also a theme of 9 wasted years to portray an image that the new dawn will bring change and better the lives of the people (Rapanyane, 2021: 252).

**Figure2:** 9 wasted years versus the new dawn.

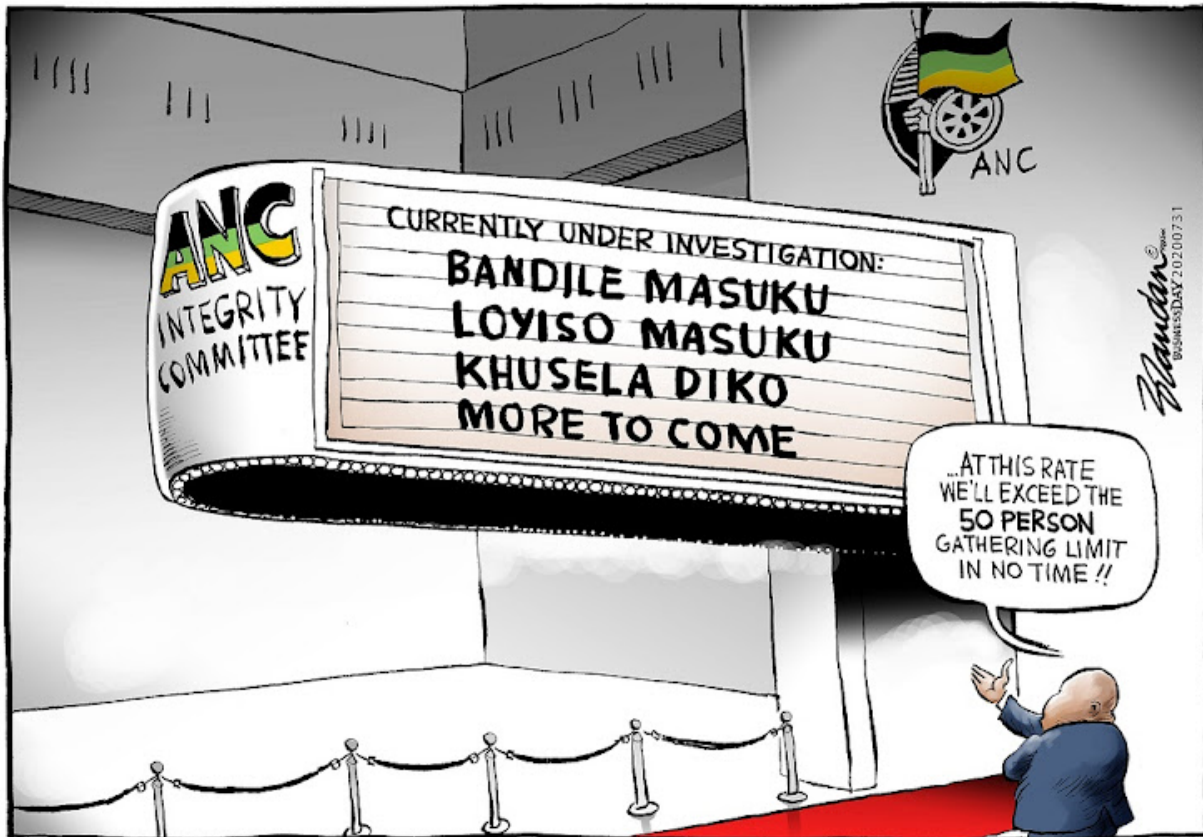


**Source:** BRANDAN REYNOLDS, 2020

The above figure presents a perspective that was narrated to the people for purposes of giving hope to the people. Nine wasted years and new dawn in South Africa refer to the former President Jacob Zuma and the current President Cyril Ramaphosa. Former president is characterized as an individual who was involved in many corrupt activities. As a result, the state capture commission was established to investigate the allegations of state capture by government leaders. Ethical leadership was seen as an important element that was lacking in government leaders. What is more interesting is the combination of the 9 wasted years leadership and the combination of the new dawn. About 80% of the leadership of the new dawn was part and actively participated in the 9 wasted years. This supports the earlier argument that the leadership changes are not a solution. Living conditions of the people have not improved as much as the promises that were made before elections. The ethical leadership and corruption free was used as a ticket to win voters. Those who suspect the leadership of the 9 wasted years were also part of the

leadership. This then suggest that the voters expected a different result from the same people (Mattes and Glenn, 2021: 304).

**Figure3:** corruption of the new dawn



**Source:** BRANDAN REYNOLDS, 2020

Figure 3 shows names of leaders that were involved in the allegations of the Covid-19 relief funds corruption. All these leaders are part of the new dawn and perceived as corrupt free leaders in the country. This had a negative impact on the public trust of the ruling party. People had hope in the new dawn and they believed that the new dawn is corrupt free. As a results, people did not vote in the 2021 local government elections. People did not lose hope in the new dawn only but they felt that the South African government system had failed them. Regardless of who is in the leadership position, ethical or unethical if the needs of the people are not addressed people will lose hope and not participate in elections. 2021 local government elections were a warning and 2024 national and provincial government elections will be a turning point. People have needs and if their needs are not met they will stop participating in the elections process.



The study found that the ruling party in 2017 in South Africa has introduced a new dawn primarily to deal with issues of corruption and unethical leaders in government. South Africa was in a spotlight and many countries considered the country as a no go zone for investors. The new dawn was seen as a turning point for a declining economy. Recalling the former president Jacob Zuma was considered as a stop to corruption and hold unethical leaders accountable for their corrupt activities. President Cyril Ramaphosa took over as the president of the country and he was mandated to deal with the blow of corruption in the South African government. His tenure has been characterized by numerous commissions that seeks to hold unethical leaders accountable. Commissions of enquiry such as SARS inquiry, PIC inquiry, Mokgoro inquiry and the continuation of the state capture commission (Mbinjama, 2021: 236).

Talking has been the order of the day for the current regime of the new dawn with a selective view of corruption in South Africa. It has become normal for South African leaders to badmouth those who belong to a different political grouping. At the expense of badmouthing a faction a leader does not belong to is the protection of the group a leader belongs to. All this affect the public service delivery. If the new dawn is serious about ending corruption they should be objective and deal with corruption even if it involves themselves and their loved ones. The manner in which the Bosasa R1.8bln has been handled and the protection of prominent leaders is a sign that the corruption as defined by the new dawn have specific names and surnames.

The new dawn might have done well in getting rid of corruption of specific individuals and disregard corruption of some but the people on the ground has not benefitted. The focus of the new dawn has primarily on fighting corruption and unethical leadership but no clear programme of ending poverty has been presented. Poverty in the country is still high and the country has been declared as the country with most unequal society globally. The new dawn has not articulated plans to deal with this fundamental challenge that is caused by lack of visionary and effective leadership. Public service delivery is declining and the country is slowly becoming a failed state. Unemployment rate is too high and the local people are revolting against foreign nationals. The capitalist system is exploiting more people on a daily basis and the gap between the rich and the poor is widening daily. South African leaders are busy with cat fights while people on the ground are suffering and dying on hunger. People on the ground have realized that thy have voting power and they are holding that power while deciding which political party will improve their lives (Foley, 2021).

## **What needs to be done in South Africa**

The government of South Africa must produce strategies that seeks to improve the public services. Corruption must be seen as a serious offence and the policies and laws must be adjusted to impose harsh sanctions for those who are found to be corrupt. The government leaders must improve systems and processes to benefit the citizens. The government must abolish unnecessary laws that serve as a stumbling block to deliver services to the people. While doing that, they should strengthen the laws that fight corruption and unethical conduct. Businesses and foreign investors must be given an ultimatum to empower the local communities and transfer the business skills to the locals. This will have an impact in the public service delivery. The country will have more independent people who don't rely on government social support systems. Regulatory reforms will empower public servants to deliver services to the people with speed. The world is slowly changing to a paperless society and the south African government should adapt to the global trends. Government processes to deliver services to the people must be modified and user friendly. The government must tighten the system to avoid personal gains by government officials and politicians at the expense of the public.

## **Conclusion**

The government of South Africa has missed an important point on what is happening on the country. Corruption is a major source of poverty in the country but the obsession leaders have about corruption do not solve the bread and butter issues of the communities. The communities live in absolute poverty and the changing of leaders do not bring food on their tables. While fighting corruption, leaders should come with a proper and viable mechanism of fighting the poverty and improve the economic situation in the country. Ending corruption and having ethical leaders contribute in a clean governance and good governance but has less contribution in ending poverty. The government leaders should prioritize the plans of ending poverty.

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