

# Ethics in Bureaucracy

## *Ethical behaviour pays*

Ethics is defined as a set of “moral principles that govern a person’s behaviour or the conducting of an activity”. Ethics or ethical behaviour pertains to certain socially acceptable conduct that may not have been codified formally into a law or a rule, violation of which could lead to formal penalty or punishment. Unethical behaviour may be frowned upon. However, it would not normally lead to any action against the person until codified as a law or rule. Ethics major concern includes nature of ultimate values and standards by which human actions can be judged. And the purpose of ethics is to define acceptable human behaviour through knowing the types of actions, its consequences and the limits of both humans and actions as well as their acceptability.

Ethics could have come into existence only when human beings started to reflect on the best way to live. The idea perhaps was to evolve customary standards of right and wrong conduct. At some point in time in human history it also got religious sanction or, in a sense, almost all religions adopted a code of conduct (like Ten Commandments) that became intrinsic part of their ethos.

In the context of bureaucracy, it came to evolve in a slightly different form as over a period of time a large part of ethical behaviour, i.e., what was expected of a civil servant, came to be codified and became a part of some legislation or a rule thereunder. Thus, dishonest conduct came to be punishable under the law. There is still, however, a large segment of ethical behaviour expected of a civil servant that is not codified.

Political alignment, if proved, can create problems for a serving civil servant as it violates a defined and codified code of conduct. However, a civil servant is expected to be politically neutral even if

such a conduct evidently or explicitly does not violate an express provision of conduct rules. There is therefore a huge debate whether civil servants in general and those occupying constitutional positions in particular, like Election Commissioner, should be allowed to join a political party after their tenure. Their joining a political party is not illegal by any stretch of imagination but raises ethical issues.

Objectivity and impartiality is a virtue that a civil servant is supposed to possess and his advice or action is expected to conform to it. Civil servants afflicted with intellectual dishonesty do enormous damage to governance. This becomes even more important in situations relating to communal tension and more so during the election process. The conduct of elections is totally in the hands of civil servants. He cannot but be neutral as the entire democratic process is dependent on him.

There is no law that mandates civil servants to be humane and accessible. However, this is what is expected of him. These attributes can give enormous amount of satisfaction to the officer himself apart from providing much needed succour to the person concerned. Over a period of time such officers are respected and remembered. They become role models for others.

The rich and influential are capable of looking after themselves. It is the poor that need to be taken care of. Not all laws and rules are clearly defined. If a law needs to be interpreted, it should be done in the interest of the poor. A civil servant is expected to do that.

It is also the job of a civil servant to protect the interests of the organisation to which he belongs. This may, on occasions, entail some sacrifice on his behalf. It would not only be ethical on his part to do so but it would also be practically beneficial as it could set example for others to make similar sacrifices. Conduct of each officer is closely observed by those around him. Hence, he should be seen as taking a lead.

If an officer does not protect his colleagues and subordinates, he cannot be formally penalised. However, it is ethically incumbent upon him to protect them from unwarranted harassment or victimisation. Yet again, such a conduct will be beneficial to the officer himself even otherwise as he will be perceived as a person who stands by his colleagues. He will be recognised and revered for his conduct. In doing so he will be displaying a leadership trait as well.

Appreciating good work is not only ethically warranted but also creates positive energy amongst team members. Everyone wants to be complimented but, more often than not, we are found wanting in appreciating good work done by others. In this case too, it is not only ethically desirable for a civil servant to be appreciative of good work but it is practical as well. It boosts the morale of the team members.

The key question, therefore, is: why should a civil servant become ethical in his behaviour? The first step would be to appreciate the fact that ethical behaviour is the best not merely in the context of morality but is also the best in the context of his own career prospects. Reputation of an officer gets built on the basis of his ethical conduct that can stand him in good stead in the future. Moreover, ethical behaviour also imparts an enormous amount of moral authority to the concerned officer. His team will follow him wholeheartedly and not just because he is the boss. All this will get reflected in his performance and outcomes.

It is, therefore, beneficial for a civil servant to be ethical. It pays to be ethical.