



# TAKING AN APPRECIATIVE APPROACH TO THE COMPONENTS OF RESPONSIBLE CONDUCT

## Abstract

Through the lens of Terry L. Cooper's Components of Responsible Conduct, this paper explains how an agency that seeks to harness a strong culture of ethical behavior among its staff, it must involve all of its employees, consider external expectations, and how its structures. This paper demonstrates how the use of Appreciative Inquiry can help communicate these goals and also engage the entire organization in this vision.

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Successful leaders understand leading change involves the entire organization. This expectation is no different for the public administrator who wants to build an ethically sound public agency. As Terry L. Cooper writes in his book *The Responsible Administrator: An Approach to Ethics for the Administrative Role*, “[e]thical conduct cannot be effectively shaped and maintained in isolation” (Cooper, 2012, p. 165). While the beneficial impact of an ethical organization is undeniable, it is difficult to achieve without engaging the entire system. We will witness, through Cooper’s Components of Responsible Conduct, how the individual, external expectations, and an organization’s structure and culture need to be involved in this work. Yet, if we are to engage the entire system in such a transformational act as maintaining an ethically sound agency, this process must inspire each of these dimensions constructively and positively (Cooperrider, D.L. & Whitney, D.) Therefore, this paper will also examine how embarking on an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach to Cooper’s components can lead to meaningful moral change within an agency where everyone is involved.

Achieving ethical outcomes requires reflection; one must stop and evaluate the issue at hand to identify just solutions. However, as we know, many people approach situations from their view. The ethical public administrator must be able to approach ethical dilemmas with a series of traits to ensure a more unbiased approach. Cooper highlights how a public administrator must be guided by a moral character, or what he calls “Individual Attributes” as they move through ethical evaluation (Cooper, T.L., 2012, p. 164). Yet, we learn from Craig E. Johnson’s *Meeting the Ethical Challenges of Leadership: Casting Light or Shadow*, how an administrator’s inner character is shaped can lead both to ethical and unethical actions. However, the unethical actor isn’t always aware of how their character shapes their ethical decision-making. As Johnson states, those who create moral shadows in organizations sometimes do so due to the “lack of

ethical expertise” (Johnson, C. E., 2018, p. 50). Yet, the lack of expertise also implies that ethical behavior can become learned. Cooper continues to write, values and virtues are “skills” that can be strengthened through workshops and socialization where individuals expand upon shared professional morals (Cooper, T.L., 2012, p. 166). To maximize impact, it is through an appreciative approach that Cooper’s individual attribute component could inspire employees to identify and expand upon individual ethical traits that are shared among all staff. It is through AI’s inclusive nature that ushers an agency to come together, driven by “possibility and opportunity”, to identify shared principles (Ludema, J. D. & Mantel, M. J., 2004, p. 4).

It’s crucial to understand how an individual's ethical traits compare to the design of an organization. Cooper helps the reader examine how the alignment between an employee’s decision-making characteristics and his next component of responsible conduct, “Organizational Structure”, can ensure an agency’s morality can be maintained (Cooper, T.L., 2012 p. 172). As most leaders know, the decisions someone makes along the path to ethical conduct can be derailed by outside influences, such as the organization's culture and design. Overtime organizational structures can negatively impact decision-making. Johnson calls these type of agencies “shadowlands”, as negative structures add outside pressures potentially circumventing value-based actors (Johnson, C.E., 2018, p. 51). Instead, Cooper calls for administrators to focus on ethical socialization and examine how internal controls can positively influence ethical decision-making, such as performance evaluations and “values-based communication” (Cooper, T.L., 2012, p. 173). To affect structural enhancement, Cooper calls on administrators to inquire into how the agency uplift and expand upon moral behaviors (Cooper, T. L., 2012, p. 173). A leader can take Cooper’s call and utilize AI’s design tools to help keep the ensure agency focusing on its “positive core” of an organization (Barret, F.J. & Fry, R. E., 2008, p. 36). Instead

of focusing on what isn't working within the structure, AI would require the agency center its efforts on what is and can work better within its structure. Yet, as David L. Cooperrider and Diana Whitney stress, the individual and organization are "interwoven"; the key to unlocking a successful relationship between the two is to evaluate organizations as "human constructions" (Cooperrider, D. L. & Whitney, D.). Through the inclusive and positive nature of AI, a bridge between employee attributes and the organizational structure can be built by bringing all staff to the table to identify shared beliefs and establish a control that support those values.

Yet, if we identify the ethics at the core of individual attributes and an organization's structure, we must also recognize how informal standards and expectations, what Cooper coins the "Organizational Culture", interplay with ladder components (Cooper, T. L., 2012, p. 180) An organization's culture comprises of "rituals, myths, values, and norms" that has the potential to sabotage the most earnest employee or agency (Cooper, T.L., 2012, p. 181). An agency's informal protocols can deter employees from accessing more ethical paths and even lead them faster towards immoral actions. Negative organizational culture can lead to what Johnson terms as "contextual pressure", such as an environment where obedience is a norm, stifling freedom of thought or ethical dissent (Johnson, C. E., 2018, p. 51). If we agree with Cooper and Johnson, that ethical skills can be learned then ensuring your agency's culture lifts moral attitudes instead of the opposite will help efforts to improve ethical socialization. This component recognizes how shared beliefs create agency culture, for the best or worst. On the other hand, this type of social cohesion, if steeped in ethical conduct, can enhance the system of an agency and lead to "expansive competence (Barret, F.J. & Fry, R. E., 2008, p. 41). Here AI tools, such as a summit, can help staff see their value within an agency and how their beliefs connect to the agency's mission. A summit can be used to help interrupt negative behavior by forcing the entire company

to come together to focus on a specific task at hand (Cooperider, D. L. & McQuaid, M.). This interrupts destructive norms by helping to “identify life giving forces”, such as shared values and forces large teams to collaborate (Mohr, B. J. & Magruder Watkins, J., p. 7).

The final piece of Cooper’s component of responsible conduct connects administrators with the purpose of their agency’s work: the public. The “Social Expectations” component illuminates that constituents of public servants receive the level of ethical conduct from the government they want (Cooper, T.L., 2012, p. 188). For an agency to meet the ethical needs of those they serve, they must become aware of what the public expects of leaders. Cooper stresses that relying only on legislative citizen participation isn't enough; administrators can’t “passively await” the voices of the citizenry” (Cooper, T. L., 2012, p. 189). This approach produces more efficient and meaningful participation from the public, yet takes an active role in civic engagement that can ensure leaders connect with their constituent’s experience. This level of interaction with the public eventually leads to increased trust in the government. It is not a surprise that the more the public feels heard and understood, the more confidence they will have in their leaders. However, Cooper points out that the techniques used to solicit public feedback, must be “carefully planned and systematically structured” or the administrator runs the risk of being easily misdirected or unsure of the course of action to take (Cooper, T. L., 2012, p. 189). To avoid this public administrators must design a participative approach that can help them capture and interpret public feedback. This is where an AI summit can be of greatest benefit to an agency’s efforts to increase its ethical pulse. The structure of a summit provides a positive space for constituents to identify shared needs for administrators to easily identify and explore in collaboration with the public. AI training can show administrators how to convene several community partners to identify shared needs and values ultimately instilling harnessing

“appreciative leadership” within agencies (Mantel, M. J. & Ludema, J. D., p. 5). This approach can both enhance the structure and individual attributes of leadership in a way that can break barriers to meaningful civic participation.

As we see, for responsible conduct to be maintained it must include individuals, the organizational structure and culture, and understand the expectations of those they serve. The individual must be equipped with the skills to engage in value-based decision-making. These skills need to be met with an organizational structure that promotes and protects ethical problem solving and a culture uplifting such behavior. Finally, within the sphere of responsible conduct for public servants, the administrator must not forget their connection to the public. One must ensure this path towards building a sustainable moral compass also incorporates the expectations of society and actively seeks out public participation. While Cooper illustrates how these components can interact with each other, an agency that takes the AI approach both guarantees a more participative process that can usher the agency towards harnessing ethical conduct at all organizational levels.

## References

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