



Teaching ethics in highly corrupt societies: Concerns and opportunities

This U4 Brief explores why a traditional approach to teaching ethics is ill-suited in highly corrupt societies, and outlines key considerations with respect to timing, content, and method when designing and implementing ethics training programmes in such contexts.

Key Considerations

Highly corrupt countries typically share three key features that make ethics training programmes both particularly relevant, and particularly problematic.

First, such states tend to have relatively weak public institutions with which to resist corruption. The

legislature, executive, judiciary, auditor-general, ombudsman, watchdog agencies, public service, media, civil society, private sector and media – the so-called “pillars of integrity” that should, ideally, act together to increase accountability and reduce corruption – are ineffective or non-existent. Weak state institutions may or may not be accompanied by weak government.

Secondly, so-called “cultural” factors facilitate high levels of corruption. Such factors include strong patronage systems and networks, systems that funnel finance and influence along unofficial channels for the benefit the corrupt elite that administer them. In many traditionally governed societies, patronage networks bring both rewards and obligations to their members. These networks are deeply entrenched within most



endemically corrupt countries, where they have proved to be both extremely resilient to change and “social engineering”, and effective at turning the processes and institutions of government into opportunities for private gain.

Thirdly, we find kleptocratic political elites who participate in governmental processes primarily in order to secure and retain access to avenues for personal enrichment at the expense of the public good, however that term may be defined. Given that they are the chief beneficiaries of a corrupted system, these opportunistic elites generally resist reforms that would restrict their rent-seeking activities in corrupted public institutions and governmental processes.

At the same time, reform efforts and technical assistance programmes, training programmes included, can hold large potential rewards for corrupt senior officials, who may therefore support reform initiatives as long as they can control access to the training. Experience has shown that corrupt elites may see **reform and plunder as complementary**, and block reform initiatives only at a very late stage, just before implementation.

Systems of patronage generally involve deeply ingrained practices and relationships that reflect a given society’s complex webs of obligation and benefit. These can often be as burdensome to the participants (due to the pressure on individuals to deliver) as they may be beneficial. While it can be argued that such systems have operated in all societies for much of human history and are domestic in origin, they tend to distribute benefits in an arbitrary and opaque manner. Many participants in such systems will likely feel that the current system has not delivered, and will not deliver, the benefits that they are “owed”.

Any programme that aims to significantly change the *status quo*, as ethics and integrity training programmes for officials set out to do, must recognise the various participants’ needs at a given point in time, and identify the nature and function of operating patronage networks which will otherwise undermine any prospect of success.

A number of fundamental issues, discussed below, need to be taken into account in order to design and deliver an effective ethics training programme in such difficult contexts.

Understanding attitudes

Endemic corruption means that for individuals at all levels of society corrupt practices become essential, not only for political and economic advancement but also, in many cases, for day-to-day survival. In practice, ethics training programmes may encounter strong resistance from both managers and lower

level public-sector employees who see all forms of anti-corruption efforts as counter-productive to their current individual survival strategies, at least in the short to medium term. Alternatively, public officials (like most people everywhere) may simply accept established corrupt practices that they believe will not, or cannot, be changed.

Ethics training in highly corrupt states will likely face serious quasi-normative barriers to effective implementation, typified by the attitude: “Everyone does it, why shouldn’t I?” Such states are likely to

be highly resistant to real normative change in favour of the public interest, or the general good, especially as corrupt habits and practices may be seen as working for

some people at some level. Ethics training in such circumstances is likely to be effective only where the regulatory, institutional, professional, and cultural landscape permits some challenge to the status quo through the implementation of different ethical practices and norms which challenge self-interest.

These beliefs must be recognised and addressed directly and appropriately in any training programme concerned with ethics and integrity. In such contexts, determining an appropriate training outcome will require very well informed and pragmatic strategic planning on the part of the programme designers and deliverers, to ensure that the knowledge and skills to be delivered by the programme will be seen as relevant.

The usual “training needs analysis” process must therefore take account not only of the needs of the potential trainees, but also of the context in which they will have to function if they are to be instrumental in bringing about reform.

In particular, any ethics training programme must aim to achieve two outcomes: Programmes must actually enable participants’ personal abilities to begin necessary change processes, and they must strengthen participants’ understanding of why such reforms are necessary and possible.

Invoking universal values: conflict of interest

Trainers will likely face additional resistance to any strategies that appear to be overly Western or morality-based. On the other hand, merely telling people to be good – still the focus of far too much ethics training even today – is of little value anywhere, and of no value in these circumstances. A more considered and balanced approach is needed.

Faced with resistance on the basis of core values, ethics training programmes should seek the opportunity to emphasise the public benefit of professional ethics

- demonstrating that ethical conduct by officials is entirely role-based, and distinct from personal and traditional notions of morality, religion or loyalty, and the private values of corrupt networks.

While most societies will lay claim to distinctive core values, few societies reject the idea that **conflict of interests** is key to establishing ethical standards for public officials – even where they acknowledge that it might be difficult or impossible to enforce such standards in practice under current circumstances. Ethics training programmes, which are focused closely on the concept of conflicting interests of governmental officials, can thus provide a key to addressing the key ethics issues of corruption, i.e. duty, fairness, legitimacy, and the public interest.

The concept of conflict of interests can also be used as a device to highlight traditional accountability mechanisms in pre-modern societies, or in fragile states, where the state is weak or non-existent: Local accountability mechanisms found in street committees and religious congregations often involve some form of tradition and practice of equitable distribution of scarce resources.

Even where a given target group does not readily recognise this distinction, the training effort can seek to focus more attention on the undesirable consequences of unrestrained personal interests on the part of public officials. “Conflict of interests” is a key concept which needs no basis in any particular cultural tradition to be understood, and resented, as inherently unfair, unjustifiable, an abuse of power, and corrupt. Once this idea is (re-)established, training can focus on ways and means of doing something about it.

“case studies on system-level problems avoids allocating individual guilt or blame”

Constructing a neutral context

In highly corrupt states, the discussion during a training may become diverted by details of individual cases: who, what, when, and how much was involved. The desire to point an accusatory finger at others can become irresistible for many participants, especially if they feel themselves to be implicated in malfeasance or abuse.

In such situations, a non-didactic **case-scenario methodology** can provide an appropriately neutral, “arm’s length” (and therefore safe), device for raising issues of administrative ethics, professional integrity, and official corruption for discussion, analysis, and hypothetical resolution. This approach works by disconnecting the discussion of issues from actual scandals and individuals, and avoiding reference to particular local situations. By focusing case studies on system-level problems the trainer removes the risk of appearing to allocate individual guilt or blame. It is then possible to generate more effective discussion

and analysis of how such lapses can be controlled or mitigated.

One of the major objectives of ethics training programmes must be to develop deep knowledge about the specific tools and strategies that can contribute to resisting corrupt and corruptive conduct in the given context. The training must also provide appropriate opportunities for what might be called “**ethics and integrity simulation training**”, for much the same reasons as pilots and soldiers receive such training: confronting and resolving a realistically problematic scenario, with clear training guidance on how to do so, aims to produce results something like a conditioned response. The practice prepares an individual to make appropriate judgments when a similar situation actually arises.

Time scale of interventions

In endemically corrupt societies, there is usually a significant delay between the inputs and outcomes of any programme or intervention: ethics training programmes and capacity-building strategies for officials may have to be seen as long-term investments, which may precede anticipated outcomes by years or even decades.

It may become apparent that in the given circumstances it may be wise, or even necessary, for the target audience to await more propitious conditions in which to demonstrate their new commitment to ethical public service and integrity in government. In such cases, the training approach should be realistic and strategic about what can be achieved in the short and long term.

A longer-term strategy should therefore focus on the gradual and incremental development of professional and technical skills in participants who could be future leaders or managers, rather than, for example, aiming to bring about rapid wholesale organisational change which will inevitably be resisted by those in power.

Cost-benefit considerations

Many effective training strategies are based on a rational cost-benefit approach that emphasises the potential advantages of more efficient, transparent, and responsive administration, e.g. by provision of needed public services such as education and health care, or by enabling genuine access to justice. The use of such cost-benefit arguments, especially in the initial stages of training, can resonate with officials who have been used to operating in a system governed by individuals’ concerns with private gain, rather than the public good. Most training groups are quick to cite, and denounce, the abuse of power involved when police or judges extort payments from citizens, or

when roads, hospitals, and water supplies are built badly or not at all because officials can steal the funds involved with impunity. The questions then shift from how to regard the offenders and their conduct, to what can be done in practice to stop them. Again, the concept of “conflict of interests” can be deployed by trainers as the focusing concept for such discussions.

A focus on general principles and hypothetical circumstances of a case – carefully designed to abstract the essential features of a particular type of ethical problem, and fully sensitive to the applicable social context – can better enable trainers and participants to analyse the issues from a systemic point of view, draw conclusions about the nature of ethical lapses in their own organisations, and discuss what strategies and methods would be most effective in eliminating them.

This approach can of course be appropriate in contexts that are not endemically corrupt. In every society, matters of administrative or governmental ethics are always concerned at some level with the judgment of individual conduct, rights and obligations, and with blame. After that, there is always a concern about obtaining an acceptable answer to the question “What ought to be done to reform this situation?” The ethics training agenda must start with this ultimate question in mind if the content of the training is to be seen as applicable in the real world.

Final considerations

In the context of endemically corrupt societies, the officials who participate in ethics and integrity training

need to recognise how, in an even-handed, just, and ethical public governance system, they would have a greater potential to achieve more predictable and fair access to goods and benefits, more control over their lives, and a better society overall.

The challenge at hand appears to be a classic chicken-and-egg paradox: Ethical officials can thrive only if robust institutions support them, and robust institutions can thrive only if ethical officials populate them. Only if this paradox is shown to be resolvable will the target audience pay some attention to the training.

But this paradox is more complex in the case of endemically corrupt societies. Here, there are three system-building objectives to meet: ethical public officials, ethical institutions, and demonstrable benefits from ethical government for most citizens. These objectives must be approached together, and incrementally, and the training programme must show how these objectives can be realised. Only then can there be any realistic expectation that participants might be prepared to change their ways and in so doing, begin to change a corrupt system of government.

As Confucius reminded us long ago: there is no need for a disciplined army, or even an adequate food supply for the people, provided that there is trust in the government. Without that, nothing worthwhile can be achieved. ■

Further Reading

Whitton, H (2008) “Making Whistleblower Protection Work: Elements of an Effective Approach”
U4 Brief 2008:24 Bergen: CMI/U4

Whitton, H (2009) “Organisational ethics policies: a primer” *U4 Brief 2008:4* Bergen: CMI/U4