

Government Ethics Strategy: Case Study of Foley Scandal

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This investigation explores the American political environment and how amoral behavior associated with the “seven deadly sins” impacts contemporary organizational culture. This case analysis also evaluates Congressman Mark Foley’s scandal related to inappropriate emails to congressional pages. The study is significant due to the fact that public strategy can fail in the aftermath of government-wide unethical behavior by senior officials; this results in a negative perception by taxpayers. Researchers and practitioners therefore are interested in understanding how to improve ethical conduct and regain public trust. This paper is an original study and further contributes to understanding how strategy is influenced by ethical conduct and organizational culture in the public sector.

Exploration of Government Ethics Strategy

Americans are increasingly worried and cynical of contemporary leadership. Traditional institutions are losing favor, leaving citizens unable to trust their neighbors, churches, and government. Additionally, America has a history of unethical behavior by leaders. Political parties market family values and personal integrity like they are selling used automobiles.

However, no political party has been found to be absolutely clean. In the quest for power and their own personal ambition, some government officials have been drawn to deadly vices that have led to their personal self-destruction. Tomlin (2007) noted this natural selfish behavior has destroyed families, friendships, happiness, and peace of mind. These moral breakdowns can seep into other factions of the political landscape. For example, in 1998, the media reported the

sexual exploits of Democratic President Bill Clinton with Monica Lewinsky. However, political scandals are nothing new for the federal government. During the months of May to August of 1987, Congress held hearings regarding the suspicion that Republican President Ronald Reagan's traded weapons for hostages in the Iran-Contra hearings (Rottinghaus & Bereznikova, 2006). In March of 2008, New York's former Governor Eliot Spitzer resigned in disgrace after admitting to spending approximately \$80,000 on call girls over a 10 year period (FoxNews.com, 2008). Rottinghaus and Bereznikova (2006) argued that presidents must maintain a strong level of accountability to the public if they want to maintain the trust of the average taxpayers. However, these situations continue to make citizens suspicious of governmental ethics. Americans have had to come to grips with their idealistic expectations for their political leaders and the realities of their downfalls. To the average American, "governmental ethics" is an oxymoron. According to the Grandfather Economic Report Series, 82% of Americans have a low level of respect for Congress, and 71% have low respect for the President (Hodges, 2011).

Additionally, New York Times reporter Stolberg (2007) asked the question, "What Next?" as unethical issues of political leaders continued to mount. Taxpayers are left to figure these moral dilemmas, operating in solo. What can today's government leaders do to regain the confidence of their constituents? How does ethical conduct impact an organization's strategy? Organizational values and ethical conduct played a vital role in the current political elections for Congress in November of 2006. Exit polls showed that voters were more concerned about ethics than any other subject. A USA Today/Gallup Poll of 1,009 adults found that only 15% of the people gave U.S. senators high or very high marks for honesty and ethical standards. In addition, the poll reported even lower marks for U.S. representatives at 14% (Koch, 2006). As a result, four Republicans resigned from the House due to ethical issues. Currently, American politicians suffer credibility problems. The study explores ethical conduct in a political environment by linking organizational culture and ethical behavior. In addition, this study also investigates Congressman Mark Foley's scandal, relating to inappropriate emails sent to congressional pages.

Congressman Mark Foley Scandal

Mark Foley, a Florida congressman, was reported to have sent sexually explicit emails to male pages who were high school students. He abruptly resigned on September 29, 2006, which set off a political landmine. House Republicans had to do damage control, while Democrats went on the attack. According to Nichols (2006), some Democrats claimed that some House leaders knew for months of Foley's inappropriate behavior. House Speaker Dennis Hastert found himself on the political hot seat. Hastert declared he knew nothing about Foley's actions, but others disagreed with his proclamation. Hastert continued his claim of innocence as he asked the Justice Department to investigate this matter. Because of Foley's resignation, he cannot be punished by his peers. Foley also apologized publicly, sought treatment for his alcohol addiction, and pointed to a childhood abuse experience by a priest as a cause of his problem. However, he

may not have escaped the consequences. Foley, a single 52-year-old man, ironically could be found violating a law that he helped write as co-chairman of the Congressional Missing and Exploited Children Caucus. Therefore, Americans must address another ethical issue among government officials.

The Evolution of Leadership Ethics

Philosophers and researchers have conducted extensive studies on value formation in individuals and organizations. Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle were intrigued with the development of values. According to Hanbury (2004), in the Greek translation, virtue is *arête*. Aristotle viewed this concept as moral and intellectual experience. Much of the study of ethic conduct derives from the Aristotelian tradition of rational reflection. In the Aristotelian case, *virtue* encompasses other qualities, such as goodness and power. Additionally, King (2006) suggested that virtue is then developed and displayed as a set of learned traits. According to Enlightenment thought, virtues become a learning process that is enhanced through continued use and application in a person's daily routine. Furthermore, King (2006) explained that some academic scholars suggest that religious principles and values have a significant influence on value formation, development, and performance in an organization. King (2006) further maintained that, while some philosophers, such as Nielson, argue the connection between God and morality as an ethic compass, other experts insisted that ethic principles originate from religious and spiritual foundations (King, 2006). Each individual brings his or her own personal beliefs into the workplace and leaders are not an exception. Daft (1995) further argued that an individual's family background, traditions, spiritual values, and experiences impact how they make moral decisions. At the medium development point, individuals learn to conform to the expectations of moral behavior, as defined by their peers and society. Most leaders at this junction are willing to follow laws and society's expectations. However, the highest levels of value formation are found in individuals who develop their own internal set of standards.

In many cases, unethical decisions made by individuals, who allow their own ethical principles to influence their decision-making, led to laws being broken or the compromise of organizational values. Consequently, individuals who make decisions outside of the organization's values sustain their moral principles internally. According to Longerbeam (2008), a recent law enforcement survey demonstrated that unethical decision making carries a heavy cost: "This problem is costing agencies money for internal investigations, settlement for damages, and loss of respect by the public. In extreme cases, termination and de-certification mean that agencies also lose their initial investment in the hiring, training and outfitting an officer." In today's society, personal and group ethics shape the value formation in organizations. Ethics and organizational culture can impact the success of an organization. In fact, ethical behavior is directly related to culture. Steinberg and Austern (1990) suggested that individuals make ethical decisions within a given context. Therefore, an ethical organization and

management culture begins with strong-principled leaders who are creditable, and visible. Consequently, ethics in organizations are influenced more by the group ethics system (culture) than by the sum of the individual personal ethics systems. However, today's application of ethics in the public sector is limited to rules, regulations, and mandates, which are far different than the Aristotelian model which provides a more holistic notion of ethics and understanding of the role and function of morality and ethical decision-making. King (2006) also mentioned that researcher Terry Cooper identifies ethic values demonstrated by public administrators; Robert Goss confirms this belief by noting that public administrators exhibit professional ethics and values; Janet Dukerich argues that managers are more affected by moral than non-moral problems. Therefore, when one discusses a moral manager, it is derived from the Aristotelian understanding, not a Christian one.

Values become an integral component for personal character and influence personal attitudes, while attitudes influence a person's behavior. Furthermore, Kern (2003) constructed several core virtuous values that influence personal ethics. The following are the core values: wisdom and knowledge; justice and fair guidance; transcendence; love and kindness; and courage and integrity. Kern (2003) argued that five steps can steer an organization to greater ethical conduct. First, organizations must close any gaps between knowledge about what to do and the actual actions that need to be closed. Second, leaders need to be selective in whom they hire. Many do not consider value alignment. Third, new employees need to be trained and immersed in organizational culture so that they become active organizational disciples. Fourth, accountability and follow-up are critical in value formation. Finally, managers need to be active in organizational culture so that they produce the proper organizational values.

Public Perception of Political Leaders

The American public has become cynical to political figures as it relates to personal values. Nelson (1994) insisted that American cynicism have evolved for many reasons. The government has been caught in various lies and half-truths, including (a) Vietnam War, (b) Watergate, (c) Iran-Contra Deal, and (d) Whitewater, to name a few. Nelson (1994) further cited the following reasons why Americans hate politics: (a) people can easily place blame at the political machine and the media that fuels it, (b) politics are all ahistorical and grounded almost entirely in recent events, and (c) they are only a partial explanation that is easily understood. However, Americans have never really been pro-politics or pro-politicians. In recent history, political strategists have shifted their approach for dealing with political scandals before the public. The most prevalent method is for a political figure to "get in front of the story" by voluntarily disclosing as much information as possible and by projecting an image of total cooperation with legal and media inquiries. This strategy goes along with denouncing questions as politically motivated, providing little information, and praying that the storm will pass over.

Ex-House Majority Leader Tom DeLay took a similar approach when he discovered he was tied to lobbyist Jack Abramoff's scandal (Harris, 2005).

Recent evidence suggests that politicians are better off just hunkering down until it is over. This strategy is based on the belief that the public has short attention spans or memory. If a politician carries on with his duties, he can overcome any negative baggage. Examples of this approach can be found with prominent Democrats and Republicans as well as the White House. For example, President George Bush and the White House came under investigation in the Plame case in 2003. Senior White House officials faced legal and political scrutiny for leaking the identity of the covert CIA operative. The White House took no personnel actions and said nothing publicly. It appeared to have worked. During the Monica Lewinsky scandal, President Clinton used the hunkered-down approach. Polls taken during that time suggested most Americans concluded that Clinton probably lied but the matter was a private one in his family. Clinton knew, if he had acknowledged the affair in 1998, the political uproar would have driven him from office. Clinton explained in 2004, "I think the overwhelming likelihood is that I would have been forced from office..." Hunkering down does work (Harris, 2005).

In the climate of unethical conduct by leaders, many individuals have low expectations of political figures' moral decision-making. Cynicism has spread in America. Postmodern influences have created an atmosphere of distrust of traditional institutions. Kouzes and Posner (2003) admitted that three-fourths of employees view top executives do pretty much what they want no matter what people think. They argue that the increase in cynicism in the workplace is due to the decline of credibility among executives. This cynicism is quickly found in the political arena. As each party tries to either take advantage of this "hot button" issue or do damage control, followers grow increasingly cynical about government leadership. Some argue that the political office is so time-consuming that only people who are willing to become full-time politicians can do it (Nelson, 1994). Yale University professor Irving Janis developed a theory to explain how politicians made decisions during the Watergate Scandal; his theory, *Group Think*, said that the social dynamics within a leadership may result in faulty, even disastrous, political decisions (Psychology Today, 1993).

In applying his theory, Janis noted Group Think is a result of a desire for conformity and concurrence within the leadership group. This theory creates bad decisions without critical and objective thinking. Members within a group appear to go along, sometimes running counter to their own personal ethics. However, Group Think runs counter to many business philosophies that emphasize the importance of harmony in working groups (Kowert, 2001). With the Foley scandal, Americans returned to their cynical ways. Why did Congress hide this truth before a federal election? This perceived covert operation in Congress assisted in dropping America's confidence in President Bush (from 44% in September to 37% in October) and the Republican Party in Congress (Lawrence, 2006).

Group Dynamics and Ethical Choices

Congressmen follow similar characteristics as other individuals in group dynamics and organizational behavior. Each party expects individual congresspersons to follow the party line. In winning a political campaign, teamwork and cohesiveness become part of the team's strategy. Sometimes this blind obedience leads to going against one's principles. Obviously, this is done with transactional relationships with peers. However, Cuilla (1998) maintained that coercion is not true leadership. The author also argued that ethics is at the heart of good leadership. If one concurs with this idea, then the question becomes, how can any good leader blindly follow any group or party? What is the cost of surrendering one's core values? According to Kurtz (2003), a highly integrated organizational culture can have significant implications for making decisions in a crisis. Effective leaders must model proper value conduct. Conflicts arise when individuals have differing values in organizations. Mackey and Tonkin (2005) further explained that the most common causes of conflict are ineffective communication skills, hidden agendas, destructive manipulation, and the need for power and control. In many organizations, senior leaders battle for organizational power at any cost. Obviously, the casualties are the followers, and the damage is to the organization's culture. Hackman and Johnson (2004) stated that, when leaders are unwilling to change, courageous followers may take principled action by resigning from the organization. According to Paine (2003), some managers have turned to values as a way to manage and eliminate certain risks, particularly those associated with misconduct but also those associated with carelessness, neglect, and insensitivity. Paine explained that, by focusing on the values that guide people's behavior, they hope to minimize the incidence of malfeasance and its damaging consequences. In addition, Price (2002) believed that, in today's business environment, ethics is about prioritizing individual and operational values for the workplace. Establishing codes of ethics and conduct will ensure that employee behaviors and the internal systems are aligned with corporate values. Social cohesion is defined as the autonomy of the individual to do good across group dynamics and organizational boundaries. According to Heuser (2005), values determine the strength of relationships in organizations. At the center of these relationships is trust, a precious commodity in an apathetic and untrusting society. Trust brings a variety of shared ethical norms that allow individuals to enter relationships uninhibited. Therefore, if an individual wants to accomplish anything with other people or groups, trust must be a chief component.

With the continual band of unethical leaders, Americans grow leery of the moral leader in political circles. American politics are rooted in a political culture that promotes a higher standard of right and wrong in government. The nation believes that the political system ought to operate in accordance with *popular sovereignty*. This concept is a value that relates to the belief that the only legitimate basis of political authority is the consent of the governed (Nelson, 1994). However, the current American political system stands in oppression of these ideals. Nelson (1994) acknowledged that politics and politicians are imperfect; Americans are growing weary

and taking action. Anti-political constitutional amendments are surfacing in a hope of providing term limits on members of Congress and a proposal to require a balanced budget (Nelson, 1994).

While Congressional employees and governmental civilians are expected to demonstrate the highest moral character, some legislators do not. Some leaders argue that success should be the litmus test, not values. However, Heuser (2005) suggested that, although the government cannot generate social cohesion, it has a critical role in stimulating social interactions. Leaders must be willing to take personal responsibility for bad decisions. In today's contemporary organizations, leaders are in danger of losing credibility with followers. Kouzes and Posner (2003) advocated leaders to "walk the talk." Followers expect leaders to show up, pay attention, and participate directly in the process of getting extraordinary things done. This lack of "modeling the way" by leaders may be caused by their personal immaturity. Therefore, progressive leaders understand the concept of modeling the way. Organizational culture sways how people make decisions. Daft (1995) added that organizational culture influences behaviors by creating acceptable responses. Many people assumed that Foley's peers would turn him in. On the contrary, this was not the case. Ciulla (1998) maintained that, the more society sees a leader's character flaws, the greater their desire for more ethical leaders. Therefore, Americans seek more ethical behavior from their leaders.

A Different Ethical Path

In the Foley scandal, individuals did not take personal responsibility for their decisions and ethical conduct. After being confronted by ABC News about his lewd email messages, Representative Foley resigned (Kiely, 2006). Foley obtained both a civil and criminal team to legally defend him. This action meant he could not be disciplined by his peers in Congress. Foley later got his attorneys to announce that he was an alcoholic and gay. They further revealed to Florida state prosecutors the name of the priest who molested him as a child. This turned into another media circus, where a Roman Catholic priest acknowledged inappropriate interactions with Foley in the 1960s. This relationship lasted for two years. At 72 years old, this priest, Anthony Mercieca, declared he did nothing wrong. However, the priest admitted to teaching him "some wrong things" about sex. Another example of this lack of personal responsibility in this case is in Congress. Despite being in a position of leadership as House Speaker, Hastert declared he did nothing wrong by failing to resolve this issue. Based on this claim, he vowed to run again for this leadership position. After Foley resigned, Hastert called for the firing of any staff member who failed to alert him about the Foley situation (Kiely & Johnson, 2006). However, he did take full responsibility for not being more aggressive in Foley's case. Hastert declared his ignorance: "I only know what I've seen in the press and what I've heard." Hastert is quoted as concerned that this negative publicity could have a domino effect on top GOP leaders. However, Hastert said he did not plan to step down because "his inaction was not the result of neglect on his part." He later explained to other conservatives that he could not step down because he would

set off “a feeding frenzy” that could hurt other Republican leaders (Fox News, 2006). By not stopping the unethical behavior of one of its members, Congress did not uphold the standards of the office. The House ethics committee had a four-member subcommittee investigating the Foley incident. For this ethics committee, the central contention was whether congressional leaders should have more aggressively investigated the problem after Representative Rodney Alexander from Louisiana (Republican) complained about Foley’s emails (Kiely, 2006). The initial investigation has shown that Foley displayed inappropriate conduct toward male pages in either 2002, 2003, or 2005, depending on the sources (Margasak, 2006). Thomas Reynolds declared that he told Hastert about the complaints months before the allegations broke relating to the 16-year-old page from Louisiana. Alexander testified that he told Speaker Hastert’s top staffers about these emails the previous year. As a result, Trandahl, who supervised the page program, and Representative John Shimkus, an Illinois Republican who ran the page board, confronted Foley and asked him to stop (Kiely, 2006).

The Republicans scrambled to hold Foley’s congressional seat. Foley’s case was at the apex of the discussion. Alexander stated he had talked with John Boehner of Ohio, new majority leader. Alexander noted that Boehner took this information about Foley and talked with New York’s Representative Tom Reynolds, the architect of the Republican midterm election campaigns. Initially, Reynolds was at odds with Hastert when he learned about the Foley problem (USA Today, 2006b). Reynolds later said he could not remember the timeframe of the conversation with Hastert or the specifics of the conversation. Faced with impending re-election, the two Republican chairmen had decided to stand by Speaker Hastert. President Bush came forward to support Hastert (Fox News, 2006) while other Republicans called for Hastert to step down (USA Today, 2006a). House Majority Leader Boehner stated that he would have taken matters into his hands if he or any GOP leader had known about Foley’s sexually explicit messages (Heilprin, 2006). Boehner still maintained that he told Hastert about this situation the previous spring, and Hastert informed him the situation [Foley’s inappropriate emails to the one page] was being handled (Heilprin, 2006). No other evidence was revealed that demonstrated that any other Republican leaders knew about the further emails to other pages. Internal polling data by a prominent GOP pollster had predicted major losses for Republicans in the upcoming election due to this scandal (Fox News, 2006). This analysis proved to be correct. On Election Day, voters led a massive revolt against the incumbents. This created one of the largest congressional shifts since 1994. Therefore, it was clear the political scandals were a determining factor in the voters’ decisions.

Given the moral decay outlined in the Foley scandal, there is a pressing need for more ethical leaders in government organizations. In fact, Americans are calling for more ethical and responsible leaders. However, stopping corruption is not an easy process. Sen (1999) noted the following reasons for this difficulty: (a) systems of catching violators often do not work since supervision and inspection are not always effective; (b) any system of governance cannot but give some power to the officers that is worth something to others who might try to offer

indictments for corruptions; and (c) even rich officials often try to make themselves richer still and do so at some risks, which may be worth it if the stakes are high. Furthermore, Miller (2001) noted that people are starving for leaders who are believable, trustworthy, and capable of actualizing constructive changes. Reave (2005) explained that her review of over 150 studies demonstrated that there is a clear relationship between spiritual values and effective leadership. Having an ethical and responsible leader promotes a high-integrity organization. There are many benefits of a high-integrity organization: (a) at the individual level, it is satisfying the spiritual nature; (b) at the corporate and community levels, it leads to attracting more voters, lobbyists, and talented people; and (c) at the social level, it increases confidence and competence for the common good (Miller, 2001). More individuals are concerned about both personal and organizational values. The concern grows as these two separate entities are increasingly misaligned. Miller (2001) further argued that, when leaders are firmly grounded in spiritual principles, business skills are applied with excellence, and people strive to apply high values to their work and outputs. Researchers in the field of workplace spirituality have found a connection between spiritual values and leadership success (Reave, 2005). Kolodinsky, Giacalone, and Jurkiewicz (2007) further insisted that employers must understand that these corporate values impact the company's bottom line. Consequently, a leader may embody many spiritual values and practices without viewing himself as a "spiritual person." Reave (2005) advocated that spiritual formation can be applied in the workplace without proselytizing or pressuring individuals to accept spirituality. Spiritual formation can be implemented in leaders, not by preaching, but by embodying the concepts of spiritual values, such as integrity, honesty, and loyalty. Therefore, spirituality is not about religion; it is about grounding individuals in a greater good beyond the party. This foundation helps party members value opposition which increases their depth and sensitivity.

The Path Forward: America's Moral Dilemma

As the vicious cycle of partisan politics and reelections continue, Congress faces difficult decisions in addressing the ethical breakdowns in its organization. Clearly, the issues of unethical behavior were not part of the partisan strategy. Questions abound as to who is responsible and accountable in Washington. Menzel (2010) suggested that ethical concerns are among the most common problems that public administrators face. Yet, living up to the public trust is more than just an act of compliance. It involves perceiving, preventing, avoiding, and resolving accusations of illegal or unethical behavior. As the Foley scandal spiraled out of control, government leaders took cover. Former Representative Foley managed to escape congressional punishment by resigning in the middle of the scandal (Margasak, 2006). However, his fellow members were not so lucky. House Speaker Dennis Hastert proclaimed that he did not do anything wrong; however, he publicly stated he took full responsibility for not handling the situation correctly. As election results continue to be analyzed, many people used this unethical crisis as political leverage. Some will win while others will lose. However, until the

congressional culture changes, America will continue to have a low expectation for government officials. In order to improve group ethics, more emphasis must be placed on group dynamics and corporate culture rather than promoting personal value systems. More than ever before, society is in search of ethical leaders who stand for a commitment to trust, honesty, and accountability. The study is significant due to the fact that public strategy can fail in the aftermath of government-wide unethical behavior by senior officials; this results in a negative perception by taxpayers. Researchers and practitioners should be interested in understanding how to improve ethical conduct and regain public trust. Therefore, politicians should benefit from reviewing Foley's scandal and the consequences of making bad ethical decisions. This scandal provides vital information on what to expect from fellow politicians and how leaders should make each other accountable.

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