

# AAPAM/KSG ANNUAL LEADERSHIP SEMINAR

“Lead Today to Shape Tomorrow”

LEADERSHIP INTEGRITY:  
PUBLIC AUTHORITY AND PUBLIC  
TRUST FOR PUBLIC OFFICIALS -



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# INTRODUCTION



- Public office is fundamentally different from private authority because the power exercised by public officials is derived from the people and is intended to be exercised in the public interest.
- The legitimacy of public authority therefore depends not only on whether officials possess legal powers, but also on how those powers are exercised.
- Leadership and integrity become particularly important at this point because every public decision carries the possibility of either strengthening or weakening citizens' confidence in public institutions.

- The OECD defines public integrity as the consistent alignment of, and adherence to, shared ethical values, principles and norms that uphold and prioritize the public interest over private interests (OECD, 2017, 2020).
- **In leadership, integrity is the consistency between what we say, what we do, and how we do it: doing what we said we would do, when we said we would do it, and in the manner in which we committed to doing it.**

- A **Code of Conduct** provides an institutional expression of these values.
- It translates broad principles such as integrity, impartiality, accountability, honesty and service to the public into standards of behaviour expected from those entrusted with public authority.
- The OECD observes that clear standards help public officials understand what conduct is expected of them and provide a basis for preventing, identifying and responding to integrity violations (OECD, 2020).

- Similarly, Article 8 of the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC) calls upon States to promote integrity, honesty and responsibility among public officials and to establish standards and codes of conduct for the correct, honorable and proper performance of public functions (United Nations, 2004; Terracino, 2019).

- The significance of these standards goes beyond compliance.
- **Public trust is ultimately shaped by the experience citizens have of public authority.**
- Citizens observe how decisions are made, how services are delivered, how resources are managed, whether officials are impartial, and whether those entrusted with power are held accountable.
- Recent OECD evidence demonstrates that perceptions of government reliability, responsiveness, openness, fairness and integrity are important drivers of trust in public institutions (OECD, 2024).

- This places a particular **responsibility on public leaders.**
- Leadership is not simply the capacity to make decisions or exercise authority. It is the **capacity to exercise authority in a manner that preserves the legitimacy of the institution and reinforces the public interest.**
- The central proposition of this presentation is therefore that codes of conduct should not be treated merely as compliance instruments. **They should be understood as leadership instruments for protecting public authority, institutional legitimacy and public trust.**

# PUBLIC AUTHORITY AS A PUBLIC TRUST



- The exercise of public authority involves making decisions that affect the rights, opportunities, resources and welfare of other people.
- A public official may therefore possess considerable discretion, but that discretion is not personal property. It is exercised on behalf of the public and within the boundaries established by law, institutional mandates and ethical standards.

- This principle is particularly explicit in Kenya's constitutional framework.
- **Article 73 of the Constitution** provides that authority assigned to a State officer is a **public trust**, to be exercised consistently with the purposes and objects of the Constitution, with respect for the people, in a manner that **brings honour and dignity** to the office and promotes public confidence in its integrity.
- The Constitution further states that authority vests in the State officer the **responsibility to serve the people rather than the power to rule them** (Republic of Kenya, 2010).

- This distinction between **power to rule** and **responsibility to serve** is fundamental to ethical public leadership. It changes the way authority should be understood. A public office is not a platform for personal advantage, institutional privilege or social status. It is a position through which public responsibilities are discharged.
- The concept also introduces an important test for leadership: **what happens when an official has discretion and the law does not provide an immediate answer?** Integrity becomes particularly important in these circumstances. Ethical public leadership requires officials to ask not only, "Is this permitted?" but also, "Is this consistent with the public interest, the values of the institution and the trust placed in this office?"

- This is why integrity cannot be reduced to the absence of corruption.
- An official may comply with the minimum requirements of the law while still exercising authority in a manner that is unfair, opaque, insensitive or inconsistent with the spirit of public service.
- Integrity requires alignment between authority, values, conduct and public purpose.

# LEADERSHIP AND INTEGRITY: FROM PERSONAL CHARACTER TO INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSIBILITY



- Integrity is often discussed as an attribute of an individual. While personal character is important, public integrity is broader. It is also an institutional condition created by leadership, organisational culture, systems, incentives, accountability mechanisms and professional standards.
- The OECD Public Integrity Handbook argues that effective integrity systems require high-level commitment and the establishment of clear standards within legal and institutional frameworks (OECD, 2020). Integrity is therefore not sustained simply by asking officials to "do the right thing". Institutions must create an environment in which ethical behaviour is understood, supported, expected and enforced.
- This gives senior public leaders at least three responsibilities.

- First, **leaders must model the standards they expect from others.** An organization cannot credibly demand impartiality from junior officers while senior officials tolerate conflicts of interest or preferential treatment. Organizational culture is strongly influenced by what leaders reward, tolerate and ignore.
- Second, **leaders must institutionalize integrity.** Codes of conduct, conflict-of-interest procedures, declarations of interests, procurement rules, disciplinary systems, reporting mechanisms and accountability structures provide institutional safeguards around public authority. These mechanisms are not substitutes for ethical judgement, but they help make ethical expectations operational.

- Third, **leaders must protect the credibility of integrity systems.** A code that exists only on paper has limited value. Its effectiveness depends on whether standards are communicated, understood, applied consistently and supported by proportionate consequences.
- The OECD specifically emphasizes that codes and integrity standards should be actionable and supported by procedures for preventing violations and managing conflicts of interest (OECD, 2020).

- The leadership challenge is therefore to move from **compliance culture to integrity culture**. Compliance asks whether an official has followed a rule. An integrity culture additionally asks whether decisions reflect the values and purposes for which public institutions exist.

# CODES OF CONDUCT AS INSTRUMENTS OF ETHICAL LEADERSHIP



- A Code of Conduct establishes the behavioral architecture of public service. It tells officials what the institution expects, clarifies unacceptable conduct and provides a reference point for accountability.
- However, the effectiveness of a Code depends on how it is understood. If public officials regard it merely as a document to be signed during induction, its transformative potential is limited. If it becomes part of everyday decision-making, professional development and institutional culture, it can become a powerful leadership instrument.

# A meaningful code should address areas such as:



- integrity and honesty;
- impartiality and objectivity;
- conflicts of interest;
- gifts and benefits;
- use of public resources;
- confidentiality and responsible use of information;
- professionalism and respect for citizens;
- political neutrality where applicable;
- accountability and transparency;
- reporting of improper conduct;
- treatment of colleagues and members of the public; and
- conduct that protects the dignity and reputation of public office.

- Kenya's public-sector framework illustrates this breadth. The Public Service Code of Conduct and Ethics, 2016, was developed to give effect to Chapter Six of the Constitution and identifies accountability, discipline, honesty and conflict-of-interest management among its objectives (Public Service Commission, 2016).
- The broader Kenyan framework also requires public officers to perform their duties efficiently and honestly, maintain public confidence in the integrity of their offices, comply with the law and avoid improper enrichment, nepotism and favoritism.
- The important lesson is that a code should not simply tell officials what **not** to do. It should articulate what **good public leadership looks like**.

- An effective Code therefore needs to be connected to leadership development, induction, performance management, decision-making processes and institutional accountability.
- It should be discussed through practical cases and dilemmas that officials encounter in their daily work.
- Integrity becomes meaningful when an officer can apply it when dealing with procurement, recruitment, licensing, regulation, public resources, confidential information, political pressure or competing interests.

# PUBLIC TRUST: THE ULTIMATE TEST OF PUBLIC AUTHORITY



- Public trust is not created by public relations. It is accumulated through repeated institutional behavior.
- Citizens develop judgements about public institutions from their everyday encounters with government. They observe whether services are accessible, whether officials treat people fairly, whether decisions are explained, whether complaints receive attention and whether public resources appear to be managed responsibly.
- The OECD's 2024 Trust Survey identifies reliability, responsiveness, openness, fairness and integrity as important dimensions through which citizens assess public institutions (OECD, 2024).

- This means that integrity has both an **ethical dimension** and a **performance dimension**. When public officials exercise authority fairly and responsibly, they strengthen institutional credibility. When authority is perceived to be used for personal, partisan or sectional interests, confidence in the institution can deteriorate.
- Importantly, trust should not be understood as unquestioning acceptance of government. In democratic governance, citizens have the right to scrutinize public authority. The OECD notes that democratic systems can accommodate what it describes as "skeptical trust", where citizens scrutinize government while continuing to engage with public institutions (OECD, 2024).

- Consequently, the objective of integrity is not to create unquestioning public confidence. It is to create **trustworthiness**. A trustworthy institution is one whose decisions can withstand scrutiny because its officials act consistently with law, evidence, ethical standards and the public interest.
- This distinction is particularly important for contemporary public administration. Citizens do not necessarily expect every government decision to produce an outcome they personally prefer. They are more likely to demand that decisions are made fairly, transparently and for legitimate public purposes. Integrity therefore becomes a foundation for the legitimacy of decisions even where those decisions are contested.

# THE AFRICAN PUBLIC SECTOR: REBUILDING TRUST THROUGH ETHICAL AUTHORITY



- Across Africa, the integrity of public institutions is closely connected to the continent's broader development agenda. **Capable institutions are required to mobilize resources, deliver public services, regulate markets, protect rights and implement national development priorities.** Where public authority lacks credibility, institutional reforms can struggle to achieve their intended effect.
- The **African Union's emphasis on capable institutions, accountable governance and people-centred development reinforces the importance of ethical public leadership.** The challenge is not simply to establish more rules. It is to develop public institutions in which authority is exercised consistently with the public interest.

- For African public services, this requires moving beyond a narrow anti-corruption agenda towards a broader conception of **ethical state capacity**. A capable public institution is not merely one that can make decisions quickly. It must also be able to make **decisions that are lawful, impartial, evidence-informed and defensible**.
- This is particularly important as governments confront increasingly complex challenges involving digital government, artificial intelligence, climate change, demographic change, public-private partnerships and new forms of service delivery. These developments expand both the capacity of government and the ethical questions confronting public officials.
- The future public official will therefore require more than technical competence. **Integrity, ethical judgement and stewardship of public authority must become core professional competencies.**

# FROM CODES OF CONDUCT TO A CULTURE OF INTEGRITY



The deeper challenge is therefore not whether governments possess codes of conduct. Many do. The more important question is whether those codes influence behaviour.

- A strong integrity culture can be built around five institutional commitments.
- **First, clarity.** Public officials must understand the standards expected of them and the reasoning behind those standards.
- **Second, leadership by example.** Senior officials must demonstrate the behaviour that institutions expect from everyone else.
- **Third, ethical decision-making.** Officials need opportunities to discuss real situations involving competing interests, discretion and uncertainty, rather than receiving integrity training only as a compliance requirement.

- **Fourth, institutional consistency.** Standards must apply fairly across levels of an organization. Selective enforcement can undermine the credibility of the entire integrity framework.
- **Fifth, accountability.** Institutions must have credible mechanisms for reporting, investigating and addressing misconduct while protecting due process and legitimate rights.
- The ultimate objective is to create a public service in which officials internalise a simple principle: **public authority is held in stewardship for the public.**
- When this principle becomes part of institutional culture, codes of conduct cease to be merely regulatory documents. They become instruments for shaping professional identity and leadership behaviour.

# Conclusion



- **Leadership and integrity** are inseparable from the **legitimacy of public authority**. Public officials exercise powers that belong institutionally to the state and are intended to serve citizens. The manner in which that authority is exercised therefore determines, to a significant extent, whether citizens experience government as legitimate, fair and trustworthy.
- **Codes of conduct** provide the formal framework through which ethical expectations are articulated. But their real value lies beyond the document itself. They **must influence judgement, organisational culture, leadership behaviour and institutional accountability**.
- The central leadership challenge is consequently to move from **rules to values, from compliance to judgement, and from authority to stewardship**. Public officials must understand that the question is not simply whether they have the legal power to act, but whether they are exercising that power consistently with the public interest and the trust placed in their office.

- For African public institutions seeking to strengthen legitimacy and improve service delivery, integrity should therefore be treated as a core dimension of institutional performance. Public trust cannot be commanded. It is earned through consistent conduct, responsible use of authority, fairness in decision-making, accountability for actions and visible commitment to the public interest.
- Ultimately, **the credibility of public institutions is reflected in how public authority is exercised when no one is watching, when discretion is greatest, and when personal interest conflicts with public duty.** That is where leadership becomes integrity, and where public authority becomes public trust.

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