



Ethics and Public Trust

Results from a National Survey

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Abstract

Is the public more likely to trust an ethical administration? Does ethical behavior by civil servants influence public trust? This article empirically examines the relationship between administrative ethics and public trust. A model is developed linking the ethical behaviors of public organizations to citizen trust as perceived by managers. The model is tested with data from a survey of cities in the United States. The results show that there are higher perceptions of trust in cities where there are higher perceptions of ethical behaviors. The study indicates that an effective strategy to improve trust should emphasize honest behavior by employees, encourage employee openness, and promote organizational and individual loyalty to the public interest.

Public trust is an important goal of governmental organizations. It provides legitimacy for governmental decision-making and operations. Governments that make efforts to gain trust may reap significant benefits in terms of strengthened legitimacy and improved willingness by the populace to support government. The literature suggests that employee ethical behaviors improve public trust (La Porte and Metlay 1996; Misztal 2001; Thomas 1998). However, few empirical studies have been done to substantiate this assertion.

The present research uses a national survey of city governments to examine the relationship between the ethical behavior of public employees and public trust. First, a literature review discusses the concept of public trust. Mutual trust, fiduciary trust, and social trust are identified as the components of public trust, with a balance between institutional-based trust and interpersonal-based trust. Next, the ethical behaviors that exemplify integrity, openness, loyalty, competence, and consistency are identified, and the critical components and dimensions of these behaviors are examined. Then a model that links these behaviors to trust is developed. The method section explains how data were collected to test this relationship, and the findings section presents key survey results. Last, the findings are summarized and their importance to public management is discussed.

Literature Review: Public Trust

The concept of trust is multifaceted, with cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components that operate at the interpersonal and institutional levels. Although no definition of trust is universally accepted, the various definitions that have been proffered have several consistent components: first, the expectation that others will behave in a predictable manner; second, the expectation that the other person will act in a way that takes our interests into account; and finally, the sense that violation of these expectations disrupts trust. Trust can be examined at the personal level, the organizational level, or the societal level, and using these levels makes it possible to see public trust as a blending of mutual trust, fiduciary trust, and social trust (Thomas 1998).

The basic building block of trust is *mutual trust*, which is between individuals and forms the basis for interpersonal relationships (Thomas 1998). Mutual trust has

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been examined from the perspective of individual expectations, from a group perspective where it is the bond for interpersonal relations, and from an economic perspective where it is the basis for economic transactions (Hosmer 1995).

Mutual trust is fairly symmetrical between individuals and is a component of public

trust in government when civil servants develop open, trusting relationships with individual citizens. To produce and maintain trust, public servants must combine mutual trust with individual citizens and fiduciary trust based on the moral obligation of the employee to act in the best interest of the citizen (Thomas 1998).

Trust in government has been traditionally based in fiduciary relationships, whereby citizens trust government agencies or officials to act in their interest (Barber 1983; Kass 1994). *Fiduciary trust* is based on principal-agent relationships in which the principal is unable to monitor or control the actions of the agent. This is an asymmetrical relationship, and the agent is morally obligated to act in the best interest of the principal (Thomas 1998).

Stewardship in public service embodies the fiduciary relationship inherent in exercising governmental authority (Kass 1994; Lewis 1991). Inherent in all such relationships, however, is the potential for malfeasance and misfeasance, which calls for the communication of the norms of the profession and the modeling of ethical behaviors (Thomas 1998).

As stewards of the public interest, public servants must guide their actions by the moral norms of justice and beneficence (Kass 1994; Lewis 1991). The norm of beneficence is the act of doing good, and it requires a standard by which the goodness of an act can be judged. Many in the field advance the ethical standard of justice, or equity, as the appropriate measure for doing good (Kass 1994; Lewis 1991; Rawls 1971).

Social trust should also be considered in attempting to define public trust. The aggregate of mutual and fiduciary trust in a society is social trust, the glue holding the society together (Thomas 1998). All the levels of trust can be characterized as social capital (Carnevale 1995; Fukuyama 1995) that enhances problem solving, reduces conflict, improves communication and cooperation, and enables more satis-

fyng relationships (Carnevale 1995). At the societal level, trust is a collective attribute based upon the relationships between people and societal organizations being perceived affectively and recognized cognitively (Lewis and Weigert 1985).

Although public trust is institution-based (toward administration), it should be clear that it is in part developed through the interactions of individual employees with the citizenry. This linkage between interpersonal interactions and the more abstract institutional-based trust is important. The public administration and political science literature agree that government in the abstract has traditionally been viewed with distrust (Misztal 2001; Raadschelders 2002), but people see government more favorably when asked about their concrete experiences with it (Goodsell 1985; Raadschelders 2002).

In this article, public trust is defined as an aggregate of mutual trust, fiduciary trust, and social trust that concerns the attitude of the public toward an administration. As used here, the public comprises the stakeholders who have a stake in an administration's operations and public service delivery—citizens, elected officials, and business/nonprofit communities. The interaction of civil servants, including managers and public employees, and the people forms the basis of mutual trust, which supports the sense of moral obligation that sustains fiduciary trust and helps to create social trust (Thomas 1998).

Developing Public Trust

Zucker (1986) developed a simple typology of how trust is produced, and he identified personal characteristics, repeated interpersonal exchanges, and institutional processes as ways to create trust. This typology is based on a society's level of development. In simpler societies, an individual's personal characteristics are very important, and a history of repeated exchanges develops mutual trust. In more complex and differentiated societies, however, trust is created through institutional processes. According to Thomas (1998), this typology can be adapted to identify specific strategies that administrators can use in developing public trust. In the following section, the development of trust is categorized into individual behaviors and organizational processes and strategies that focus on the moral values necessary to build and sustain mutual, fiduciary, and societal trust.

The behaviors of a trusted person, organization, or public entity are judged both cognitively and affectively. Behaviors assessed cognitively are based on evidence of trustworthiness through the demonstration of competence, reliability, responsibility, and dependability in performance of role obligations (Butler 1991; McAllister 1995). The affective dimension reflects the emotional commitments between individuals demonstrated through a genuine concern for the welfare of others accompanied by actions that protect and support them (Lewis and Weigert 1985; McAllister 1995).

The cognitive and affective assessment of trustworthy behaviors comes from socio-

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logical and organizational theory, but the ethical aspects of the behaviors were not connected until Hosmer (1995) linked them to philosophical ethics by examining the moral values that make certain behaviors ethical. By synthesizing the work on the behavioral characteristics that create trust, he makes a moral argument, based on

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the work of Butler and Cantrell (1984), that the behaviors necessary for trust to develop are integrity, openness, loyalty, competence, and consistency (Hosmer 1995).

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is developed in which the ethical behaviors of public employees are supported by organizational processes that build and sustain trust.

Ethics and Public Trust

The present research hypothesizes that public trust is influenced by behaviors that display integrity, openness, loyalty, competency, and consistency in administration. *Integrity* is a basic ethical value based on individual responsibility to act on appropriate values and beliefs (Lewis 1991). For the purposes of this study, it is defined as a reputation for honesty and truthfulness (Hosmer 1995), focusing on the perception of the honesty and truthfulness of public workers. In government, honesty is the quality most admired in the workplace, and the behavior of superiors strongly influences unethical behavior (Burke and Black 1990). Integrity is one of the five principles of the Code of Ethics of the American Society for Public Administration (ASPA 1994). In building and sustaining trust, public employees should demonstrate personal integrity.

One component of integrity is moral leadership, which demonstrates an individual behavior and an organizational strategy in building and sustaining trust. Moral leadership is a primary strategy in creating ethical organizations (Bruce 1994; Brumbach 1991) because of its strong effect on the ethical climate within an organization (Berman, West, and Cava 1994).

Openness refers to the willingness to expose information or share ideas (Hosmer 1995). As an ethical behavior in public administration, openness can be viewed in two ways. First, it is seen as a social value from a moral perspective (Jeavons 1994). Public organizations operate in an atmosphere of transparency where both internal and external communications are available to public scrutiny. The promotion of open communication is reflected in America's fundamental laws, with the Constitution protecting the rights of freedom of assembly, speech, and the press (Graber 2003).

From the moral standpoint, openness also means that the public has access to governmental records, documents, and employee performance. In this perspective, openness is a legitimate requirement for every institution that serves the public good (Smith 1995). Sunshine laws and laws that provide for freedom of access to governmental information guarantee public access, linking openness to freedom. When management adopts a defensive attitude and restricts openness, this often creates an atmosphere of hostility and mistrust that hampers the ability of the agency to operate (Graber 2003).

Second, openness is viewed as free communication between citizens and government. In democratic societies, openness on the part of public organizations is based on the belief that unrestrained communication is beneficial to the decision-making process because it facilitates the expression of a multiplicity of opinions (Graber 2003). Discourse theory advocates that governance based on sincere and open dialogue between citizens and administrators will restore legitimacy to public administration (Denhardt and Denhardt 2000). Officials acknowledge that the good reputation of government among its employees and the public must be maintained (Graber 2003) both for the legitimacy of government and to enhance trust. Closely aligned with the integrity of employees and the preservation of openness and freedom are loyalty to and protection of the public's interest.

Loyalty refers to benevolence and the willingness to protect and support and encourage others (Hosmer 1995), which can apply to the behavior of civil servants toward the people. The principles of the ASPA Code of Ethics (1994) see this loyalty in respect and support for the Constitution, the law, and the common good. For the purposes of this article, loyalty refers to both an interpersonal and an institutional aspect embodied by respect for the public interest and by acting in ways that promote it. Loyalty to the public interest is realized through a governmental agency's efforts and activities to identify and meet public needs. Citizen satisfaction with services can also be used as an indicator of loyalty to the public interest. The authors hypothesize that the people trust agencies that identify and satisfy their interests.

The traditional definition of competence indicates that an individual has the knowledge and skills needed to perform a job (Hosmer 1995). This definition has been adapted to create the term *ethical competence*, or the capability to develop and implement ethical values and activities.

Traditional public administration has focused on neutral competence (Denhardt and Denhardt 2000). A commitment by the organization to rigorous training is one organizational strategy for developing and supporting this type of competence (La Porte and Metlay 1996). The concept of ethical competence requires that the training should also focus on developing public workers' ethical behaviors. This can be achieved through workshops and training with a focus on ethics, and through the development of codes of ethics to guide the organization.

The fifth ethical behavior is consistency, indicated by reliable, predictable, good judgment in handling situations (Hosmer 1995), and expanded here to include organizational consistency in service delivery. *Service consistency* is defined as the predictability of a continual level and quality of service. In government service delivery, consistency indicates the public provider's ability and commitment to maintain existing service levels, pay for services, and provide high-quality services. It is hypothesized that public trust in local government can be sustained and increased through service consistency.

The preceding discussion identified the ethical behaviors that may lead to public trust. Based on this discussion, a direct relationship between ethical behaviors and public trust is hypothesized. A visual representation of this relationship is provided in Figure 1. In the section on findings, these ethical behaviors are examined empiri-

Public trust is influenced by behaviors that display integrity, openness, loyalty, competency, and consistency in administration.

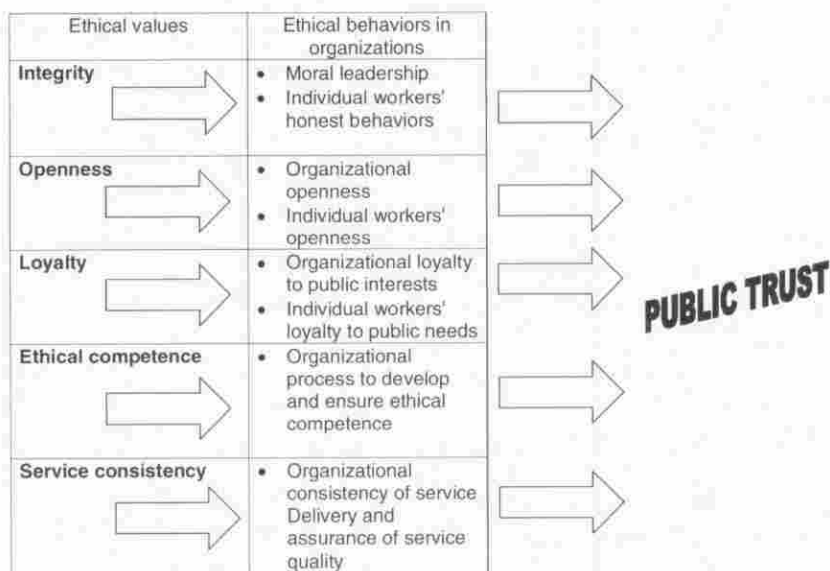


Figure 1. Model of Ethics and Public Trust

cally and related to the perceptions of public managers regarding the level of public trust held by citizens, elected officials, and businesses.

Methodology

In early 2000 a survey was sent to the chief administrative officer in every United States city with a population larger than 50,000. The cities were identified through an address file from the National League of Cities and verified using the International City/County Management Association's *Municipal Yearbook* (ICMA 1998). Among the 541 surveyed cities, 249 returned the surveys with valid information, for a response rate of 46 percent. Among the respondents, 63.5 percent were city managers (or chief administrators) or assistant city managers, and 15 percent were chief finance or budget officers (finance directors or budget directors). Other respondents (21.5 percent) included senior management analysts, directors of administration, directors of planning, and other high-level city officials. Comparisons to check the nonresponse bias found that the respondent cities were representative in the population distribution, but the sample was more representative of council-manager governments. Telephone interviews were also conducted with fifty randomly selected city officials who had not responded to the survey. Their responses were compared with the survey responses. No response bias was found in this process.

Measurement

The measurement of ethical behaviors was created using the behavioral context provided by Butler and Cantrell (1984). First, integrity focuses on moral leadership and the honesty of individual public employees. Second, openness is measured through

the information-exposure efforts and activities of organizations and individual workers. Third, loyalty is expressed as identifying public interests and meeting public needs by organizations and individuals. Fourth, ethical competence is captured in the ability of a public organization to develop an organizational process to ensure ethical behaviors. Last, service consistency addresses the ability of an organization to sustain service levels and quality.

Table 1 lists the survey items that measured these dimensions of ethical behavior, and these items were used to create indexes. For example, the "moral leadership" index includes the three items used to measure this ethical behavior. Similarly, other indexes were created to measure "individual workers' honest behaviors," "organizational openness," "individual workers' openness," "organizational loyalty to public interest," "individual workers' loyalty to public needs," "organizational process to develop and ensure ethical competence," and "consistency of service delivery and assurance of service quality."

In measuring public trust, the focus is on social trust—institution-based trust toward a governmental agency, which is measured through the perceptions of public managers regarding the trust of different stakeholders in administrations: citizens, elected officials, and the business and nonprofit community. Table 2 lists the survey items measuring trust. Then relevant items are used to create a Citizen Trust Index, an Elected Officials Trust Index, and a Business/Nonprofit Trust Index. All the trust items are then used to create a Public Trust Index.

The reader should be reminded that ethical behaviors and public trust are measured, in this study, by public officials' perceptions. There may be differences between these perceptions and the reality of ethical behavior and public trust, but they can be identified and explored by using other methods.

Findings

Table 1 shows that while many ethical behaviors are commonly observed in local governments, others are not as prevalent. For example, 28.2 percent of respondents indicate that "ethics training is required for all managers" in their administrations. Just 17.4 percent of respondents agree that in their administrations "each unit is encouraged to develop their own code of ethics." Interestingly, almost all respondents agree that in their administrations "managers demonstrate ethical conduct," but only two-thirds agree that managers are required to play a moral-leadership role.

The results in Table 2 indicate that although respondents indicate trust from all stakeholders, a higher degree of trust comes from elected officials than from citizens or the business/nonprofit community. On average, 87.0 percent of the respondents agree with the items measuring trust of elected officials, compared with 66.4 percent for citizen trust items and 76.4 percent for business/nonprofit community trust items. This difference may reflect the fact that managers work more closely with elected officials than with other stakeholders and are more aware of the elected officials' attitudes. This finding indicates a need to improve the trust of citizens and business communities. It also suggests that frequent interaction and communication between management and stakeholders may improve trust.

The statistics in Table 3 depict the association between ethical behaviors and trust. All the association measures show a positive and statistically significant rela-

TABLE 1
Ethical Behaviors

<i>Survey items on ethical behaviors (In our administration,)</i>	<i>Agreement (%)</i>
Moral leadership	
Managers demonstrate ethical conduct (<i>N</i> = 248)	99.6
Managers promote ethical conduct in job (<i>N</i> = 248)	92.3
Managers are required to provide moral leadership (<i>N</i> = 246)	64.2
Individual worker honest behaviors	
Most employees are honest (<i>N</i> = 248)	94.0
Employees have high ethical values (<i>N</i> = 248)	87.5
Organizational openness	
Residents, elected officials, and the business community are informed of the administration's finances and service activities (<i>N</i> = 248)	78.7
Residents, elected officials, and the business community are informed of the administration's services performance (<i>N</i> = 247)	56.0
Individual Workers' Openness	
Employees are willing to expose job performance to public scrutiny (<i>N</i> = 249)	34.1
Employees are active in giving new ideas to improve accountability (<i>N</i> = 249)	61.4
Employees support the strategies and actions that make them accountable (<i>N</i> = 249)	45.8
Organizational loyalty to public interest	
Achieving public consensus on service priorities (<i>N</i> = 249)	63.5
Providing services the public needs (<i>N</i> = 248)	93.1
Satisfying public needs (<i>N</i> = 249)	79.5
Achieving high citizen satisfaction for public services (<i>N</i> = 249)	79.5
Individual workers' loyalty to public needs	
Most employees understand the needs of the public (<i>N</i> = 248)	77.0
Organizational process to develop and ensure ethical competency	
We have a code of ethics (<i>N</i> = 248)	68.5
Each unit is encouraged to develop their own code of ethics (<i>N</i> = 247)	17.4
Ethics training is required for all managers (<i>N</i> = 248)	28.2
Ethical conduct is reviewed on a regular basis (<i>N</i> = 248)	33.1
We regularly conduct workshops in which ethics are discussed (<i>N</i> = 248)	31.9
We have developed performance measures for goals (<i>N</i> = 249)	63.1
Consistency of service delivery and quality	
Maintaining existing service levels (<i>N</i> = 249)	85.9
Continuing paying for the service we provide (<i>N</i> = 249)	81.1
Providing high quality of public services (<i>N</i> = 248)	92.3
<i>Notes:</i> The items are measured on a five-point scale of Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree. The cumulative percentages of Strongly Agree and Agree are listed.	
<i>N</i> is the number of responses.	

tionship between ethical behaviors and public trust. This finding shows that a more ethical government has higher degrees of trust. For example, in cities that conduct regular ethics workshops, 91.1 percent of respondents agree or strongly agree that "most elected officials trust the administration." Only 82.2 percent of cities without

TABLE 2
Perceived Public Trust

<i>Survey items on public trust</i>	<i>Agreement (%)</i>
"Most citizens believe the local government . . ."	
services meet their needs	78.3
treats citizens fairly	72.7
is competent	72.3
understands their needs	58.2
can be trusted	57.0
fulfills its promises	60.2
officials are honest	66.3
"Most elected officials . . ."	
trust the administration	84.7
believe the administration is efficient and effective	83.1
believe the administration is competent	90.8
believe the administration keeps its promise to citizens	89.2
"Most business and nonprofit community . . ."	
trust the administration	76.7
believe that the administration is efficient and effective	73.9
believe that the administration is competent	78.7

Notes: The items are measured on a five-point scale of: Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree. The cumulative percentages of Strongly Agree and Agree are listed.

Survey based on 249 responses.

such workshops say so. This suggests that strategies to improve an organization's internal ethical state improve public trust, thereby providing support for the continuation of ethics-enhancement strategies.

Although all the association measures are statistically significant, the size of the measures indicates that ethical behaviors have different effects on trust. For example, moral leadership is more important in developing citizen trust and elected officials' trust than in enhancing the trust of business/nonprofit agencies. Organizational openness may have a greater impact on elected official's trust than on the trust of citizens or business/nonprofit societies.

Table 3 also indicates that organizational and individual loyalties, defined as an organization's ability to meet public demands, have a strong influence on citizen trust. Elected officials' trust is largely associated with individual workers' honesty and organizational loyalty. Finally, individual workers' honesty and openness seem to have a strong influence on business/nonprofit trust.

A multivariate model was developed to examine the impact of ethical behavior on public trust. All the ethical behavior variables are used to regress on the dependent variable—the public trust index. The model presented in Table 4 is statistically significant at the 0.001 level, and 45.2 percent of the variance of the dependent variable is explained. This indicates that public trust is improved by workers' honesty, openness, and organizational and individual loyalty when all ethical behaviors are taken into consideration simultaneously. The improvement is statistically significant. Combined with the results in Table 3, this indicates that these variables are

TABLE 3
Ethics and Public Trust

	<i>Citizen trust</i>	<i>Elected official trust</i>	<i>Business/nonprofit community trust</i>	<i>Public trust (combined above three)</i>
Ethical behaviors				
Moral leadership	0.254	0.244	0.157	0.294
Workers' honesty	0.265	0.309	0.222	0.334
Organizational openness	0.162	0.208	0.161	0.210
Individual openness	0.272	0.239	0.263	0.329
Organizational loyalty	0.378	0.341	0.226	0.402
Individual loyalty	0.331	0.294	0.169	0.349
Ethics competence	0.202	0.200	0.170	0.250
Service consistency	0.272	0.218	0.205	0.285

Notes: These statistics are measures of association using Kendall's tau-c, which has values of -1 (perfect negative association) to 1 (perfect positive association). Tau-c is used to measure two ordinal variables.

All measures are statistically significant at the 0.01 level.

TABLE 4
Multiple Regression Results on Public Trust

<i>Independent variables</i>	<i>Regression coefficient (b)</i>	<i>Standardized coefficient (β)</i>	<i>t statistics</i>
Constant	6.924	1.507	
Moral leadership	0.463	0.087	1.559
Worker honesty	0.907	0.130	2.336*
Organizational openness	0.001	0.015	0.266
Individual openness	0.622	0.173	2.944**
Organizational loyalty	1.152	0.392	5.371**
Individual loyalty	1.708	0.153	2.622**
Organization competency	0.003	0.017	0.281
Organization consistency	0.007	0.020	0.290

N = 237

r^2 -adjust = 0.453

F-probability = 0.000

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

more important than others when it comes to public trust. The implication for management is clear: An effective strategy to improve public trust should emphasize honest behavior by workers, encourage individual workers to be open, and promote organi-

zational and individual loyalty to the public interest. This strategy should begin with moral leadership that builds organizational processes to provide employees with ethical training, develops codes of ethics, provides opportunities for citizen involvement in decision-making, provides service consistency, and rewards employees who demonstrate honesty and integrity.

Conclusion

The research described in this article developed the argument that public trust is increased through the ethical behaviors of integrity, openness, loyalty, ethical competence, and service consistency. These behaviors create an ethical climate within the organization that is communicated to citizens, elected officials, and business organizations, thereby increasing public trust in the local government. Using the trust and ethics in public service literature, behaviors were identified that have a firm ethical base and normatively are believed to increase levels of trust. The study finds that there are higher perceptions of public trust in cities where managers have higher perceptions of ethical behavior. This supports the argument that ethical behavior increases public trust.

An important finding of this study is that the integrity, openness, and loyalty to the public interest of individual workers are crucial in increasing public trust. This suggests several effective public trust-enhancement strategies for managers. First, management should make every effort to promote the integrity of public workers through ethics training, workshops, and the development of codes of ethics. These efforts should be consistent and sustained to achieve behavior changes in public employees, and the ethical behaviors should be role-modeled by management. The research summarized here suggests that resources spent on these efforts should receive a healthy return in the form of increased public trust.

Second, the development of openness among public employees requires the elimination of their fear of being punished as a result of exposure. Employees should be encouraged to propose new ideas for improving management, and management must provide a safe environment in which this can occur. An organizational environment should be built that encourages frank communication between employees and managers. Performance measures should be used for work improvement, and not as a basis for punishing individuals. Organizational procedures to protect employee openness may benefit organizations by increasing public trust.

Third, loyalty to the common interest requires that management identify public needs and develop tools to meet them. Mechanisms such as citizen surveys, focus groups, and representation in decision-making should be used in identifying needs and developing service-delivery tools. As public needs may change over time, management should make a persistent effort to assess such need changes and develop service-delivery strategies to meet them. This research suggests that resources spent on these strategies can benefit an organization by increasing public trust.

Fourth, this research also suggests that individual public employees should be made aware of what the public needs so that they can improve public-service delivery and maintain the public trust. One way to accomplish this would be to have employees and citizens participate in the development of meaningful performance measures. Interactions between citizens and public employees that are focused on mutual problem-solving and measurement identification have the potential to in-

crease trust and understanding. Managers need to facilitate such meetings and demonstrate, through role-modeling, their willingness to be open.

The research summarized in this paper advances the ethics and trust literature by developing and empirically testing a model linking ethical behaviors with public trust. Its findings have practical value for managers by suggesting several ethics-focused strategies for enhancing trust. It is hoped that this study will stimulate new research on the creation of ethical organizations, the strategies for developing ethical behavior, the use of moral leadership, and the understanding of the complex concept of public trust.

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