Background to ASPA Code of Ethics Review

Some time before his induction as President of ASPA, Erik Bergrud asked Jim Svara and Jim Nordin to co-chair a working group to review the ASPA Code of Ethics. The code had not been officially reviewed in more than 10 years and had not been revised since 1994.

The charge given to the working group was to review the code. There was no presumption it would be revised in any way.

Process

The working group was formed and began its deliberations almost immediately after Erik’s installation. The working group was composed of approximately 30 people; academics, practitioners and students. The membership of the group is about 50% academics, 50% practitioners; about one-quarter of the group is made up of “pracademics.” The group reviewed a paper Jim Svara had written on the ASPA code that looked at the ASPA code as well as the ethics codes from several other organizations.

The process the group followed included reviewing the current ASPA code and brain-storming what each member thought would be a “best” code. The group “met” via email, conference call, wiki and bulletin board. They posted ideas, samples from other codes and also discussed at length the process that should be used to review the code. In summary, the working group tried to work as consensually as possible. The co-chairs acted as “secretaries” and clearing houses for the ideas that were racing across the country and sometimes around the world.

The working group finally agreed that revisions in the code should be made and that the review process would take more than one year – the time period Erik Bergrud had originally requested. The group felt it was much more important to obtain as much input as possible from all of ASPA’s members than it was to finish in one year. To that end, the working group published descriptions and updates of their efforts in PA Times; they created a blog and an on-line discussion board; they presented a briefing of their efforts at the 2011 ASPA conference and another at the 2012 conference; they made presentations at ASPA regional conferences; they conducted open forums at both the 2011 and 2012 ASPA conferences to invite ASPA members to contribute their ideas; and they invited students in ethics courses to write papers on the ASPA code and how it might be improved. In addition, the co-chairs briefed ASPA leadership on the effort in January 2011 and again in January 2012; they briefed the ASPA National Council on the effort in March 2012 and provided a very brief summary of the working group’s effort to all ASPA membership at the 2012 conference. The working group held a webinar in May, 2012 to solicit additional comments.

Considerations

Almost from the beginning, members of the working group consistently raised three aspects of the code for consideration: the important principles of the code; the structure of the code; and the “style” of the code. The current (1994) code was a major move forward for ASPA and elevated the ethical standards for the field. The content was organized around five major canons or principles derived from what the committee saw as the five major sources of ethics in the public sector: notions of the public interest, law and formal ethics codes, personal integrity, organizational dynamics, and professionalism. The code uses these sources in the five major headings and has 32 sub-points or specific tenets. After almost two decades of use, the current code appears to some to be legalistic and directive because of its specificity. The five principles can easily be lost in the details. In addition, there was a widespread view that the language should now be more aspirational.
Through extensive and intensive deliberations and many, many versions, the working group concluded that the code could be improved with changes in these three areas. The working group concluded that there were several sub-points in the current code that should be elevated to major headings, or “ethical principles” to join the five in the 1994 code. The three principles that were elevated deal with social justice, inclusive participation in governance, and full information and advice – even options or items that are not popular. The group also concluded that the code would have more power and be used more if it were shorter – if the principles were emphasized and the sub-points (what the working group calls “practices”) were listed separately. This is similar to the approach of the International City/County Management Association, American Institute of Certified Planners, and the American Psychological Association. Finally, the group felt that the code should call for the highest level of ethical conduct and express the social responsibilities of public administrators. So the language was changed in tone to be more aspirational, even though the working group understood that the code would now be calling for behavior that was more ideal than would always be possible.

Results

As a result of this intensive effort, the working group in now proposing a revised ASPA Code of Ethics that contains eight principles. The principles are written to be aspirational in tone, and they are elaborated somewhat more fully than previously. In a revised preamble, the code addresses the intended audience for the code. It is written for the members of ASPA but it asserts our hope that all those who serve the public will be aware of and influenced by the standards that ASPA has established. In presenting the code to members and the public, the preamble and principles will be used alone as a statement of the values and standards of ASPA.

In addition, 38 practices have been developed. The full code continues to include the principles and the practices, but the practices are a corollary document that is intended to illustrate and offer guidance in meeting the aspirational goals of the principles. The practices may be changed as new circumstances arise, but the principles would be changed only as part of a major and comprehensive review.

It is the considered opinion of the working group that by implementing these changes in style, structure and content, the ASPA code of ethics will be more powerful, more memorable, and more useful to all who labor in public administration. It is our hope that the code will be useful to other associations of public professionals and that overarching standards and values will usefully complement the more specific and targeted provisions in other codes.

Moving forward

The working group was also unanimous in its belief that the Code of Ethics is of limited lasting value if there is no commitment to its implementation and regular review. Clear responsibility must be assigned for activities to advance awareness and commitment to ethical principles and practices in ASPA and to promote the importance of ethics in public service generally. As a result, the working group has proposed the establishment of a Professional Standards and Ethics Committee in ASPA. The working group proposes that the ASPA National Council start the process to establish the Standing Committee on Professional Standards and Ethics (requires bylaws change). In the interim to maintain the momentum established by the working group, we recommend that the National Council establish an ad hoc Professional Standards and Ethics Committee during its January quarterly meeting that will function until a standing committee is approved.

The National Council should establish and assign responsibilities to the Professional Standards and Ethics Committee to include the following key functions:
• Recommend ongoing activities to raise awareness of the code of ethics and activities to promote its use
• Work with the ASPA Section on Ethics which will continue to take the lead role in ethics research and teaching
• Recommend procedures and processes to address alleged ethical breaches by ASPA members
• Prepare supporting material such as a new edition of the workbook, *Applying Standards and Ethics in the 21st Century*
• Develop case studies for training and teaching
• Work with other associations of public officials to develop complimentary approaches to codes of ethics that allows the ASPA code to serve in combination with a specialized professional code
• Monitor ethical issues, develop sessions for conferences and chapter meetings, and initiate projects and programs to promote ethics in public administration
• Recommend a process for periodic review of the ASPA Code of Ethics

With a Professional Standards and Ethics Committee to guide the implementation of the revised Code of Ethics, to monitor ethical issues, and to develop activities to expand awareness of and commitment to the Code, the working group is convinced that ethics will be strengthened as a pillar of ASPA and public administration.

Endnotes


3 ICMA has tenets and guidelines—sometimes presented separately and sometimes as a combined document. AICP has principles and 25 enforceable “Rules of Conduct.” APA has principles presented separately from 89 standards. In addition, the National Association of Social Workers has values and principles followed by 16 pages of standards.
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