

CHALLENGES OF ETHICAL VALUE IN THE EFFECTIVE PERFORMANCE OF SECRETARIES IN NIGERIA TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS

ADENIYI, RAFAT O.

Office of the Registrar, Federal College of Education
Abeokuta

Abstract

The professional Secretary as authorized business support and interpreter of rules and regulations faces an ethical dilemma of striking a balance between what ought to be and what it. However, new ethical issues are emerging in organizations such that the discussion of ethics in administrative procedures and operations should attract the interest of all progressive minds. The situation is further accentuated by the peculiar work culture in each institution, the management's disposition, organizational politics, antecedents, prejudices, the experience and level of professionalism of the practitioners. This paper addresses the concept of ethics in offices and Nigerian public service, peculiar ethics of confidential secretaries, impact of ethics in the effectiveness of secretaries, challenges disrupting strict observance of ethics and recommendations. The paper also assess the role of professional association in ensuring strict compliance with ethical rules.

Keywords: Secretary, ethics, professional, value.

Introduction

It is very obvious that every sound mind believes that education is the bedrock of national development. I also believe that only well delivered bedrock can make a nation get to the level of error free, fraud free, sexual harassment free, financial harassment free, and free from all other vices that negates all ethics in the professional practices (Obawusi, 2014). So many efforts has been made by academics and non academics to consider influence of ethical values in the performance of an officer as well as the overall effect on the impact of the organization in its environment. It is important to note that ethics is a household name in any professional practice in the world. It encompasses not only rules but way and manner a professional handles his/her work. It clarifies limitations and extension of working relationships both with the internal and external publics of a professional. Of course every professional represent the organization in one way or the other, so therefore ethical procedure is the *expected natural disposition* of every office worker. While there are strong similarities, there are some differences depending on organization and profession.

Ethics is derived from the Greek word 'ethika' which means 'character' or 'custom'. It deals with customary way of acting and universal and relative judgments as to the rightness or wrongness of human conduct; hence, its associated with moral philosophy. Ethics represents the distinctive moral ideas and attitudes of a people. It is the moral principles that control or

influence a person's behavior. Synonyms for the word 'ethics' include: principles, standards, values, moral ideals, beliefs, codes, etc

Historically, in the public administration, the Congress in United State of America (USA) first imposed a general code of ethics in 1958, and about twenty(20) years after, the code was expanded and founded the Federal Government Office of Ethics as part of the Ethics in government Act of 1978. Resultantly, the first comprehensive set of standards of ethical conduct was arrived at in 1992. At the grass root of government (including teaching) in 1924. The particular ethical codes have reflected the anti-corruption and anti- politics values (Obawusi, 2014). This simply means, real ethical conduct is based on the premise of unbiased approach to official and formal issues on a non- political, non personal affiliation basis.

Summarily, ethics is made up of: (i) principles relating to right and wrong conduct
(ii) morality, and
(iii) the standards that govern the conduct of a person, especially a member of a profession.

From the statements above, ethics is hereby broken down according to Chapter 4 of the Federal Republic of Nigeria Civil Service Handbook:

- Discipline *Loyalty *Honesty *Courage
 *Courtesy *Cooperation
- Tact *Industry *Avoidance of delay *Tidiness *Helpfulness
 *Kindness
- Attitude to Public Funds *National Consciousness *A good image of the
 service
- Social problems and Social Justice *The use of authority. *Efficiency

Similarly, in (Adebayo, G. A.,2013), the Civil Service Manual Handbook also clearly prescribes the following ethical principles to guide the conduct of the Nigerian worker:

- good conduct *Honesty *Courage *Courtesy *Co-operation
 *Tact
- Industry and, *General ethical principles that border on serving one's ministry or
 department in some way and good public image.

Realistically, the aforementioned depicts that every organization and its departments must have ethical climate, which is referred to as **high agreement** among departmental employees that their management set as a good ethical example, enforced high ethical standards, reminding employees of ethical consideration relating to their work and the extent of employees awareness of unethical or illegal behaviour. It should also be remembered that unethical conduct can only be determined in relation to an act, attitude or behavior adjudged contrary to the practices commonly advocated by given rules at a given time in the field of administrative morality. An unethical act means a deviation from normal behavior as advocated or legally adopted by the prevailing rules.

The subject of discussion is not any officer in an establishment, it is centred on a professional who manages an office and that is the Confidential Secretary. He provides administrative support by conducting research, preparing reports, and tending the general office tasks, such as preparing messages, receiving guests and attending to their quest, arranging calls,

meetings, and travel, processing expense claims, collating billing guides, drafting narratives/speeches and communicating letters to clients, etc. However, performance is a function of knowing what and how to handle a task.

Specifics Of Professional Ethics

In the words of an astute Administrator(Akinola, R. A.,2015) professional ethics has to do with personal, organizational and corporate standards of behavior expected of professionals. Professional and those working in acknowledged professions, exercise specialist knowledge and skill. In this context, the skill entail various forms of documentation (law, contract, letters, forms of enquiry and assessment, etc); handling troubled and lazy support staff; handling of difficult Boss and clients, coping with very difficult situation, etc. How the use of this knowledge should be governed when providing a service to the publics can be considered a moral issue and is termed 'professional ethics'. However, Adebayo, G. A.(2013) opined that there are two dialectical sides of the public service coin and that is '**ethical guides and discipline**'. This is to say the professional ethics expected of staff in the educational sector are clearly prescribed in the regulations governing the conditions of service of staff of each institution.

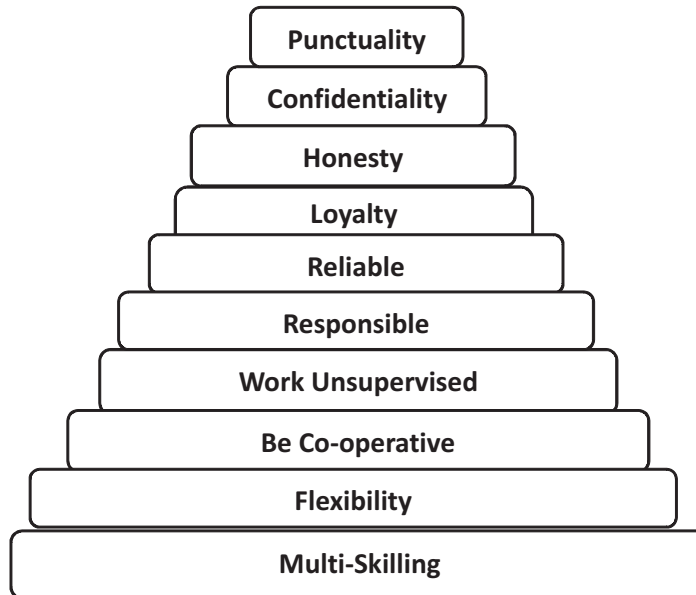
Secretarial personnel are therefore capable of making judgement, applying their skills and reaching informed decisions in situations that the other practitioners cannot because they have received relevant training. One of the earliest examples of professional ethics is the '**Hippocratic Oath**' to which medical doctors still adhere to this day. This is however not alien to other professionals in the society as every professionals across different fields have **rules of engagements** that guide their conduct in the work place.

The sensitive position of trust and confidentiality occupied by secretarial personnel imposes some ethical obligations upon them to act for the benefit of the employer, clients and the public. It is therefore expected to act as a trusted agent in professional relations, implementing responsibilities in the most competent manner and exercising knowledge and skill to promote the interests of the corporate employer. Invariably, secretaries are most prominent and authorized as far as routine office affairs/management is concerned to such an extent that he is obliged to operate within the doctrine of fairness and equity in all his dealings. The professional consideration of a secretary's ethical disposition bothers on when is an act right?, when is an act wrong? And what is the nature or determining standard, of good and bad? For the professional of any field, the question of "what should I do?" is applied more narrowly. When it comes to this, it calls for the use of ethics techniques or tools as specialized of the particular profession.



Professional Ethics Of A Confidential Secretary

The ethics of a secretary are the morals and principles relating to the job. These requirements are automatically taken on board when you accept any position as a secretary and you will be expected to uphold them at all times.



***Punctuality:** this is the backbone of a secretary. He gets to work early enough and almost the last to leave the office. Punctuality at work will afford the secretary the opportunity of planning his time and schedule properly. He will forever be coordinated as he has arrived early enough to strategically place everything right. Also punctuality will enable the secretary to forestall any inadequacy among other office staff. The nature of the secretary requires consistency which cannot be solidly achieved without being punctual. In the annual appraisal exercise, punctuality is one of the major consideration of a staff performance. Infact, is the bane of contention in most cases. The secretary is the angel of the office and amongst attributes expected of him is punctuality. He should always keep in mind: “early to bed, early to rise”.

***Confidentiality-** Always keeps information private and confidential about the firm you work for and its clients. Never reveal sensitive information even if you are in a discussion where everyone is wondering what is happening and you know. Always be trusted.

***Honesty-** Do not take the credit for something you did not do and do not let someone else enjoy the credit for something you did do. Always tell the truth.

***Loyalty-** Always be loyal to your Boss and Organization. At times greed and self centredness of your Boss might make you feel he does not deserve your loyalty, never sell him out at any cost. However, do not get caught up in office gossips. If you display your loyalty you will receive the same in return.

***Reliable-** Show you are reliable. Be punctual for work and meetings at all times, and remember, always take the relevant documentation with you to the meetings. Do not abuse the “sickle”. You just never know what your future holds in relation to your health. Ensure every task you are given is completed on time and to the best of your ability.

***Responsible-** Prove you are responsible by setting priorities and carrying out tasks in a timely manner. Always meet deadlines when they are given. Your boss puts his/her confidence in you. Write yourself a “to do list” even if its priority changes ten times a day. Do not delegate if the job cannot be done as efficiently and accurately as you would have done it. If you do not delegate, always check that the project is on track time wise. Do not forget about it because someone else is doing it.

***Work Unsupervised-** Always keep your work up to date and be productive. Meet deadlines. On daily basis, check and update your “to do list” to ensure that none are overlooked or omitted and have them in priority order.

***Be co-operative-** Always assist and share your expertise with your colleagues wherever it is possible. Always be happy to carry out duties asked of you. Where you are to say “NO”, say it gently and explain why you cannot do the task asked of you. Do not overload yourself. It is becoming more popular in the workplace, these days for secretaries to take on the training role within their organization.

***Flexibility-** If its late and your boss needs an important report typed and faxed, immediately do it. The best jobs are where you have a “give and take” arrangement. You just never know when you may want an hour off at a minute’s notice to attend an emergency.

***Multi Skilling-** Current trends in office administration has expanded the role of confidential secretaries in the sense that it has made him perform more of office administration than the traditional typing and note-taking. Aside this, secretaries play a lot of role in documentation on project/contract handling, school examination administration, computerization of results and crucial step taking in decision making, etc. Learn as much as possible about computer programs and other positions in the organization. You just may need this knowledge when you apply for advancement within the firm. This is also particularly useful as you are usually the one who has to show the Boss how to use some of the computer programs. The trend these days is for the Boss to have more “hands on” with software e.g. e-mail, spread sheeting. Like I said above, you could be asked to take on training too if you are familiar with the programs. Performing a multi-skilling role, a secretary should be independent and display a high sense of inventiveness. This attributes will equip him to perceive the need for action and the urge to do it. Here, adopting the **Helicopter Factor** that is, the ability to rise above a situation and perceive it in relation to the surrounding context, would be useful.

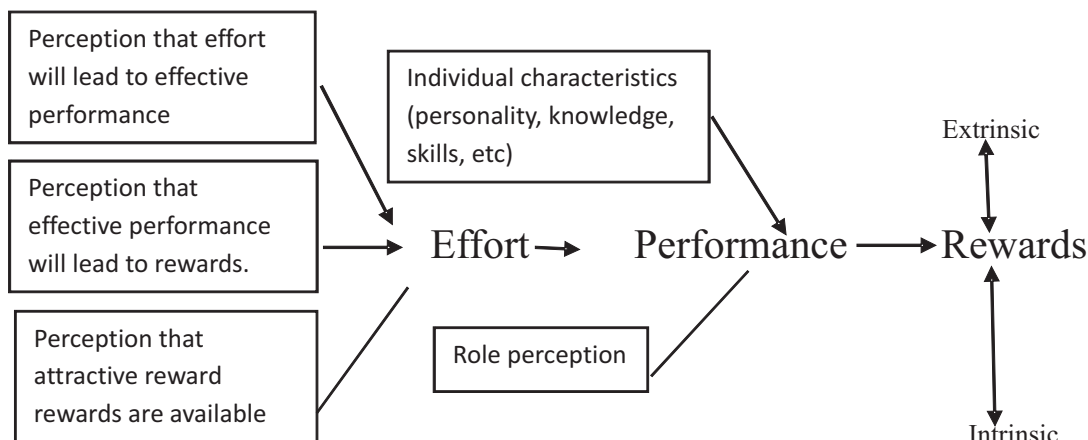
***Bribery-** (otherwise known as compromise) Do not be tempted to accept gifts or favors from internal or external clients just in case there's an underlying reason. Always follow your organization's procedures and policies. Very rarely you will ever get something for nothing. There is usually always a trade off. You may end up paying the ultimate price for your job.

Job Performance:

Simply put, performance is the accomplishment of a given task measured against present known standards of accuracy, completeness, cost and speed.

Effectiveness has to do with accomplishing, and producing the intended or expected result. The fruit /outcome after all processes of production is the making of effectiveness. Whereas efficiency is the act of functioning in the best possible manner with the least waste of time and effort. Efficiency involves equipments and machineries, with required skill and competence. The combination of all of these leading to expected outcome is the effectiveness in an officer. Achieving desired result or meeting up with set target are all functions of good performance while good performance multiplies the usefulness and service delivery of the organization to its public. Here, Vroom's Expectancy Theory would be necessary to be applied as a backup for our discuss.

Summarily, Vroom Expectancy Theory proposes that an individual will decide to behave or act in a certain way because they are motivated to select a specific behavior over other behaviours due to what they expect. In essence, the motivation of the selected behaviour is determined by the desirability of the outcome. However, at the core of the theory is the cognitive process of how an individual processes the different motivational elements. Expectancy is about the mental processes regarding choice, or choosing. It explains the process that an individual undergoes to make choices.



The figure above indicate that effort or motivated behaviour occurs when an individual perceives that the effort will lead to effective performance, which in turn will lead to rewards which are seen as attractive. However, Vroom opined that: *"effort alone may not necessarily lead to effective performance, as other factors are involved, e. g. individual's own characteristics (personality, knowledge and skills) and the way in which he perceives his role"*.

The expected performance of a secretarial personnel in line with the Expectancy Theory is the display of versatility and observance of strict ethical conduct in his delivery of service as to way and manner he: manipulates the computer and making it functional etc, This is because no other professional has been trained in such a manner even machines have not been

coupled to perform such diversified roles. The interest and wishes to make things work and render the organization mission and vision realistic is what the secretarial personnel had been specifically trained for. This is our ethics: efficient service and excellent job performance.

Some Ethical Posers:

- Is it ethically right for a secretary to simultaneously hold the prime schedule of secretary in the institution and also be an executive of a staff union?
- Can every secretary exercise professional restraint not to tamper with their personal file(s) in situations where such is accessed and how easily can such be detected?
- The secretary is usually privy to important information within the system, is he allowed to divulge same, especially where withholding such information may be injurious to the system?
- The general concept or belief about secretaries is that they are to be submissive, obedient to superiors, seen and not be heard, does not have a say on issues, etc. As a professional secretary do you believe in this concept?
- You and your immediate Boss have a divergent view on an issue. Your opinion seems to be the right thing to do but the opinion of your boss though not right is premised on the belief that he intended helping a staff. Your Boss invited you and discussed with you what he expected from you in terms of your steps and approaches. How do you handle the situation?
- A criminal act of document leakage has occurred in your office and all facts available to you revealed that your Boss is involved. How will the truth be unveiled?

Unethical Attitudes Unexpected of a Secretary

▪ **Gossiping:** This attitude is very common among office workers nowadays, secretaries inclusive. The fact that secretarial profession is dominated by female gender does not render it a “*Gossipers' Profession*”. This idea is not good if actually we are working for the betterment of our organizations and the nation at large. Do not gossip, do the work for which you are being paid. It is not only detrimental to the work ethic among employees; it can endanger your job. One can easily lose his/her aura of professionalism by being a target of or a participant in office gossip. A lot of compromise can occur during gossip. Vital and confidential information, can be let loose unconsciously while gossiping because gossiping is the making of loose talk and busy-bodging (that is, information diahorrhea). An ethically conscious personnel knows what to engage in during free periods at work.

▪ **Negative Attitude:** This include menacing, neglect of client due to prolong phone call, nepotism, nagging, hissing, use of abusive language, wearing of slippers in and around the office, etc. Your attitude informs everything about you and what you do. Ensure you display good attitude to other staff always and callers to your office as first impression counts a lot.

- **Poor Attendance and Frequent Tardiness:** Act promptly on the assignment given to you as postponement causes delay and hinders achievement of goals. Do not procrastinate. Cultivate the habit of regularity at your work stations.
- **Unprofessional Body Language and Mannerism:** It is unethical for Secretaries not to cover their mouth when yawning or sneezing. Some cultivate the habit of chewing gum in the office which is highly embarrassing, using of teeth to cut finger nails, dipping hand into the holes of the nose. etc. Those fond of these acts should desist from doing so.
- **Excessive Fragrance or Unpleasant Body Odour:** Odours coming out from some office workers are not good enough. As Secretaries we must look neat, fresh and keep fragrance to a minimum. Body aura of the occupant of an office can constitute nuisance to the atmosphere and to visitors. The office fragrance is a psychological approach to welcoming a guest and making him/her feel belonging.
- **Unwarranted Beautification:** The secretary is neither an **artist** nor a **designer model**. Avoid keeping inch-long nails with unusual polish colors. Note that ragged or unclean nails make a poor impression. As Secretaries, long nails will not allow you to work well, most importantly on the computer.

Impact of Professional Ethics to Overcome Challenges:

Any one who feels that the accomplishment of excellent performance under an ethically conscious office environment have no challenges is far from reality of the work. Challenges of the schedule can emanate from various angles as secretarial personnel were identified as 'NO ENEMY, NO FRIEND' staff. Of Course: '**NO ENEMY, NO FRIEND**'. Such challenges include:

- ✓ Challenge of support staff
- ✓ Challenge of superior's junior colleagues
- ✓ Challenge of colleagues in other cadre whom you have to work it
- ✓ Challenge of inconsistency of immediate superior
- ✓ Challenge of stubborn and difficult visitors
- ✓ Challenge of introducing Change and embracing change.

It is therefore relevant for every secretary to be mindful of the fact that there is a set of principles that guides us in the service we provide and that it is these rules that set out standards of performance of our duties. Hence, the moment we deviate from the ethics, things will no longer be at ease.

Coping With The Challenges

It's A Moral Obligation: Keep in mind the rules and regulations that are set to guide you in your day-to-day discharge of your duties. Always be honest and refrain from

deceitful practices. You need to be perfectly honest to all around you. Remember that you can only manipulate and deceive people for a while; you cannot do it for ever. Give your boss or employer the impression that you are honest. To have integrity, your conscience should not be dead. Do what you feel is right and to the best of your ability.

Continuous self-Upgrading

To enforce sound ethical conduct in your organization, you must seek for new knowledge on daily basis as learning is a continuous process. You must not allow your skills or knowledge to become outdated, so look-out for ways of staying current. Professionals are known for their specialized knowledge by enhancing their abilities and improvement on personal and professional knowledge which reflects in the course of their professional assignments. As much as possible, make a deep personal commitment to develop and improve your skills, and where appropriate, acquire relevant degrees and certifications that serve as the foundation of this knowledge.

Demonstrate the Core Values of Professionalism And Ethical Conduct

It has been observed that those who dress professionally will behave in the same way. Ensure you put on appropriate attire and demonstrate right etiquette. For many jobs, workplace attire does not include wearing a suit and tie, what is important is a neat and clean appearance. Wear the clothes your employer requires or one that is the norm for your place of employment. Punctuality, organization and dedication to your job is very important. Be polite in speech and body language. Words like *“please”* and *“thank you”* will go a long way in establishing a good working relationship.

Supporting and Counselling Others

One is not an island on his own. No one knows all. While you depend on others for what you do not know, always be prepared to be open-minded to others in your working environment. Ensure you share the spot light with colleagues by taking time to show others how to do properly and lend an ear when necessary. You should not take delight in colleagues not knowing what you know. Take time to teach others and have impact on their lives. This will in turn have a great impact on the society. Remember that if you were not taught, you cannot know, so teach others.

Aside this, the secretary is the teacher, role model and mentor of all other support staff. She should therefore jointly design modality of job design and enrichment which should be discussed with the staff for better understanding and performance. Remember you are not alone for the overall achievement, your supervisory skills also determines.

Listening Carefully to Others

Just like you want people to listen to you when you communicate with them, always try to also listen carefully to others because others also want to be heard, as a result, give people the chance to explain their ideas well.

You promote professionalism by doing what it takes to make others think of you as reliable, respectful and competent for by so doing; you will have an impact on the society.

Good Relationship in the Work Place

Having had a clear view of what constitutes professionalism, you can ask yourself whether or not you demonstrate these characteristics to people around you in your places of work. The way and manner you relate with people will not only show to what extent you display professionalism but goes a long way to determine the impact your organization can make on the nation's economy. No organization can make any meaningful impact without good understanding among the co-workers in the office.

Existence of good relationship in an organization denotes establishment and improvement of mutual understanding between workers with a motive to assist them serve better, acquire and retain a good reputation to enable them work together in a cooperative manner to achieve results. As secretaries, we need to maintain good working relationship with people at all levels. Be it your employer, employees, co-workers or customers as your ultimate aim is to keep them happy.

Knowing how to do a job is no longer enough to achieve results at work, but how well one relates with people. Few years back, people felt the product spoke for itself but this is no longer enough. The public today are more demanding and unless employees communicate more positively, the understanding and support may not likely be received.

Role Of Professional Association In Promoting Ethical Conduct For Effective Job Performance

Agitations from secretarial practitioners all over the country-Nigeria has made it known that secretaries have not been given free hand in the discharge of their duties. There had been a lot of disruption and challenges

If professional Associations are meant to:

- Promote the establishment and maintenance of standards of competence and conduct by those engaged in and are interested to engage in private secretarial practice.
- maintenance of high standard of professionalism in the face of secretarial administration., etc

The various professional bodies owe it a responsibility to regularly organize series of training and retraining programmes. Mandatory Course (mcpep) should be organized and even be attached credits for upgrading.

Similarly, each branch of APSSON should be run under a functional executive committee and hold talks on in-house issues with secretarial personnel, at every

meeting occasion or gathering. In-house issues are quite important as challenges peculiar to individual organization can be addressed and necessary official steps where necessary. Here, the confidence of each of the members are challenged while the introspection of self-examination and inclination would be stirred.

Conclusion

In line with the popular motto of the Guardian newspaper "*Conscience Nutured by the truth*", let me reaffirm my conviction the Confidential Secretary as the moral conscience to always strive to pursue excellence and uphold the truth in its *confidential* and *angelic* role. It is important for any practitioner to be mindful of the fact that, 'whatever we do and whatever religion, ethical considerations get intruded and must be accorded a prominent place' (Olurode, 2008).

Professionally, the secretary has an ethical obligation to always strive to tolerate within the doctrine of fairness and equity in all his dealings. By so doing, he should display the following five(5) attributes as loaded in his training: fairness, friendliness, firmness, foresight and being focused.

Recommendation

As a reminder, the Secretary should:

- ❖ Deliver excellent service
- ❖ Provide direction and to other support staff in the office
- ❖ Develop through attending national and international Workshops and professional conferences
- ❖ Be objective while working with people
- ❖ Achieve excellent results for the immediate office and the entire institution
- ❖ Managing self and personal skill to boost his competence
- ❖ Maintain total deviation from moral bankruptcy, sexual harassment and financial embarrassment
- ❖ Using human and material resources effectively and efficiently
- ❖ Finding innovative solutions to organizational challenges
- ❖ Embracing Change
- ❖ Ensure everyone uphold the status quo by living by example

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