

Ethics Management Framework for Local Government in South Africa: Category A Municipality

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Abstract: There is a lack of a context-specific, integrated ethics management framework that adapts King IV principles to the operational authenticities of South African local government which contribute to persistent corruption and weak accountability mechanisms that undermine public trust. This study aimed to develop an integrated ethics management framework for local government, using the City of Cape Town as a case study. A mixed-methods explanatory sequential design was used, involving a survey of 57 junior and middle managers and interviews with senior managers within the HR department. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis, underpinned by institutional theory, virtue ethics, and stewardship theory. Key challenges include political interference, coalition fragmentation, cadre deployment, and tick-box training programmes. Thus, prioritising an ethical climate and systemic reforms such as depoliticised oversight and values-based interventions is essential to restore public trust and good governance.

Keywords: Ethical Climate, Ethics Management, Ethical Leadership, Local Government, King IV Principles

1. Introduction

Despite comprehensive legislative frameworks and the adoption of King IV corporate governance principles, municipalities continue to grapple with corruption, political interference, and weak accountability mechanisms that undermine public trust and service delivery. The paper was based on incorporating the ethics principles outlined in the King IV Report on Corporate Governance.

2. Literature Review

The literature traced the global to local trajectory of integrated reporting and management systems and critically analysed South Africa's paradoxical struggles in the face of King IV commitments. Internationally, corporate governance diffusion literature highlighted challenges in transplanting complex principle-based norms into contexts with weak institutional enforcement and different cultural norms. Locally, research converged on persistent implementation gaps, highlighting the discord between King IV principles of integrative and ethical leadership and the country's operational realities of rampant political interference and a compliance-oriented culture. This literature presented South Africa's struggles not as a failure of the King IV Code itself, but as a systemic pathology in which form undermines content.

2.1 Theoretical Orientation and Ethical Management

The study argued that failure at local government level stems from inconsistency with deep socio-political realities of developing states, characterised by neopatrimonialism, political patronage networks, and dominant party systems. This study focused on a critique of policy transfer, arguing that observed box-checking compliance represented superficial isomorphism where forms of ethical governance were adopted without substantive normative foundations. Studies by Durokifa, Johnson, Ramlachan, Mdhluli and Magqirana (2023), Harry and Shopola (2024), Mamokhere (2024) and Nkwinika, Mafunisa and Nekhavhambe (2025) consistently found that while South Africa has guiding rules for local government behavior, ethical behavior of municipal workers had not improved, as demonstrated by numerous corruption cases.

2.2 Ethical Dilemmas in the Public Sector

By examining conflicts where adherence to formal norms conflicts with political directives, clientele loyalties, or organisational survival norms, research revealed how gaps between policy and practice were actively negotiated on the ground. Studies by Jam, Bayat and Rulashe (2025) examined the systematic character of "state capture," while Mdlaose, Ntini, Ndebele and Yende (2024) explored tensions between reporting misconduct and organisational loyalty. Sibanda (2022) argued that an organisation's ability to deal with ethical dilemmas relates to how ethics management initiatives were placed at organisational fulcrums. In South Africa, civil servants face

tough ethical choices between helping the community or following political party rules (Adanlawo and Chaka 2024).

2.3 Conceptualisation of Ethics and the Triad Model

This research conceptualised ethics by distinguishing between "ethics as compliance" (check-box, rule-based commitments to avoid sanctions) and "ethics as integrity" (active, value-based commitments to the public good). The Triad of Ethics Concept Model examined the interplay between the self (individual moral agency), the good (ethical principles and public interest), and others (stakeholders and community). The model revealed a profound disconnect in defining and pursuing the good for others within complex metropolitan spaces, where the "good" is often contested and politicised with competing priorities between service delivery, transformation, and fiscal sustainability. Simultaneously, the "others" comprising marginalised citizenry were frequently treated as passive recipients rather than active partners in ethical governance, creating a reciprocally strengthening cycle that stalemates even benevolent ethics management frameworks.

2.4 Operational Definitions and Ethical Theories

Governance refers to systems and processes of decision-making and control; integrity involves consistent alignment with moral values; ethics encompasses codified social principles; morality concerns individual beliefs of right and wrong; and values represent fundamental priorities guiding behavior. Three theories of ethics were examined. Deontological theory claims community members have a moral duty to act morally. Teleological theory emphasises that the ethical scale of actions is measured by their results. Virtue theory focuses on an individual's ethical character rather than actions performed (Creswell and Plano Clark 2025). Koma and Madzivhandila (2022) and Kanyane (2024) investigated how Ubuntu ethos could illuminate community engagement in local government, though caution that Ubuntu should not be misappropriated to justify favouritism.

2.5 Corruption and the Legal Framework

In South Africa, the government faced a massive test of winning back public trust, particularly at local government level since democracy post-1994. Factors contributing to unethical behavior included high-level political interference with the concept of "toe the party line" and cadre deployment from the ruling African National Congress party. The ethical governance framework was built on domestic legal provisions including the Constitution and other supporting legal statutes. Despite this comprehensive legal structure, serious compliance difficulties stem from systemic disconnect where formal implementation became performative box-checking driven by political favouritism and weak enforcement (Kanyane 2024).

2.6 Conceptual Framework and Research Model

The conceptual framework examined systematic failure of ethics management in South African local governments based on conceptual insufficiency and institutional isomorphism, bringing together three components: an imported formal rational ethical model (derived from OECD/King IV Principles), a dominant neo-paternalistic governing culture (characterised by political patronage), and a mediating indigenous philosophy of Ubuntu. This study investigated whether CPT had responded to the national government's call to create ethics officer positions to oversee ethics matters when rendering public services (Institute of Race Relations 2025).

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Data Collection and Sample Size

This study adopted a mixed-methods research approach with an explanatory sequential design, combining quantitative and qualitative phases to investigate ethics management misrepresentation within local government in South Africa. The target population comprised of public managers within the HR section. For the quantitative phase, 57 junior and middle managers with more than five years' experience completed a structured survey questionnaire. For the qualitative phase, senior managers (Heads of Department) were purposively selected for in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The exclusion criteria included temporary appointments and management experience of less than five years.

3.2 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS (version 27) to generate descriptive statistics, including frequency distributions, percentages, means, and standard deviations. Qualitative data from interview transcripts

underwent thematic analysis through iterative coding stages. Emerging themes included "political intervention as habitual corporate governance," "strategic separation of policy and practice," and "compliance as performative ritual."

3.3 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to strict ethical guidelines including informed consent, data privacy, and confidentiality. All participants were fully informed of the study's purpose, risks, benefits, and data usage, with the opportunity to ask questions or decline participation without providing reasons. Participant identities remained confidential, with data stored securely in password-protected files accessible only to researcher. Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation, member checking, rich description, and maintaining a clear audit trail. Validity was addressed through content and criterion validity measures, while reliability was established via pilot testing and consistency protocols.

3.4 Results

The quantitative findings revealed that while formal ethics management initiatives exist, they demonstrate weak institutional capacity and superficial implementation. Only 30% of respondents positively affirmed ethical behaviour as an organisational norm, with significant ambivalence (22%) indicating widespread uncertainty. Ethical leadership perceptions showed compartmentalised ethics, where personal ethical orientation (50.8% positive) contrasted sharply with lower ratings for fairness (31.2%) and power sharing (45.8%). The qualitative results identified increased political interference as the dominant pattern fostering unethical behaviour, characterised by coalition governance fragmentation, cadre deployment, and the "construction mafia" phenomenon affecting procurement integrity. Additional challenges included siloed ethics measures, misalignment between policy and practice, competing priorities between service delivery and ethical compliance, and inadequate training programmes that function as tick-box exercises rather than transformative interventions.

4. Discussion

The study synthesised quantitative and qualitative findings to explain why ethics management fails within CPT despite formal policies and structures. Key challenges identified included siloed and fragmented measures (ethics committees operating without input from audit, risk, or HR departments), misalignment between policy and operational practice (81% agreed policies exist but only 34% agreed they guide daily decisions), competing priorities where service delivery and political agendas override ethical procedures (76% agreed "getting the job done" takes precedence), weak accountability and impunity (79% agreed disciplinary processes are slow or politically influenced, with average case resolution taking 18-24 months), and inadequate training (72% agreed training was too generic to prepare for real ethical dilemmas). Specific failure areas included whistleblower mechanisms (only 23% would feel safe using the system, with just 7 reports filed over three years in a municipality of 20,000+ employees), ethics committees lacking enforcement powers, and a disciplinary system where senior staff face systematically lighter sanctions than junior employees.

The study concluded that the municipality had achieved formal compliance but not functional ethics, with systems designed to appear effective on paper rather than operate effectively in practice. Suggested solutions based on international benchmarks (Sweden, New Zealand, Malaysia) included centralising ethics management into a single coordination unit, depoliticising oversight bodies by requiring external members, replacing generic training with mandatory scenario-based programmes, guaranteeing whistleblower anonymity through third-party-managed systems, enforcing consistent consequences with published disciplinary outcomes and strict time limits, and integrating ethics into performance management as a weighted criterion for promotions. The observed patterns were interpreted through the study's theoretical framework of institutional isomorphism and neo-patrimonialism. Municipalities adopted uniform ethics policies to gain external legitimacy, but these policies remain decoupled from daily practice because of competing political and cultural logics.

5. Conclusion

The study concluded that fostering an ethical climate must be prioritised to restore public trust and ensure good governance at local government level, given its proximity to the most vulnerable South Africans. The research underscores that the need for systemic reforms that reinforce ethical conduct through depoliticised oversight structures, integrated ethics management, and values-based cultural interventions.

6. Contribution

This study contributes to public administration theory and practice by developing a phased 36-month implementation strategy is proposed to ensure sustainable institutionalisation. The framework comprises preventive measures (policies, stratified training, ethics-based recruitment), detective measures (integrated risk monitoring, integrity audits, multi-layered reporting), and responsive measures (graduated sanctions, ethics advice services, restorative justice processes).

Ethics Declaration

The data in this article was taken from a work in progress of a PhD study that collected the data anonymously and provided participants with detailed privacy policy and rights after ethical clearance from the institution and research setting was provided. Only participants who gave consent to the policy participated in this study.

AI Declaration

The authors confirm that no generative AI tools were used in the conception, writing, analysis or interpretation of this study.

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