Beyond Compliance: Ethical Leadership and Organisational Culture in Nigerian Public Administration through Proactive Integrity

Gabriel Asuquo, Ayodeji Idowu Joshua & Balogun Olawole Hakeem

Abstract
This paper aims to critically evaluate the limitations of compliance-based ethical frameworks in Nigerian public administration and propose a paradigm shift toward "proactive integrity"; a model of ethical leadership anchored in virtue ethics and African communitarian philosophy. Adopting a qualitative research design rooted in conceptual analysis and critical inquiry, the study engages in a close reading of institutional realities and current policy frameworks, specifically the National Ethics and Integrity Policy (NEIP). The research finds that existing mechanisms often prioritise rules and sanctions over the cultivation of moral agency. Drawing from Aristotelian virtue ethics and the indigenous African philosophy of Ubuntu, the paper contends that public servants must be repositioned as moral agents embedded within relational communities rather than mere policy implementers. It further critiques the colonial bureaucratic legacies and patron-client systems that stifle ethical autonomy. Consequently, the paper proposes a normative framework integrating relational leadership, institutional culture reform, and participatory moral education. By advocating for culturally resonant ethics training and exemplary leadership, the study concludes that reclaiming public service as a moral vocation is essential for rebuilding civic trust. It ultimately calls for a philosophically informed public ethics that moves beyond technical fixes to nurture leaders who embody, rather than merely enforce, the values of justice, dignity, and the common good.

Key words: Ethical Leadership, Organisational Culture, Proactive Integrity, Public Administration, Ubuntu Philosophy

Introduction

Across the corridors of Nigeria's ministries, departments, and agencies, a quiet ethical dilemma simmers beneath the loud rhetoric of anti-corruption. Although civil servants are doing their jobs, policies are routinely formulated, and performance indicators are systematically recorded. Yet a deeper question continues to surface: What type of ethical leadership can meaningfully transform institutions, not simply by enforcing rules but by appealing to the

moral conscience of those within them? This question becomes important in the wake of systemic dysfunction and endemic corruption, in which Nigeria's public service finds itself at a moral crossroads, where compliance-driven ethics have proven insufficient to foster authentic integrity and sustainable governance (Ezeani, 2021; Olowu, 2020).

This paper enters a vital conversation in both philosophy and public administration: how to cultivate ethical leadership and organisational culture that moves beyond regulatory compliance and toward proactive integrity. In philosophical terms, it confronts the problem of moral agency within bureaucratic structures, a topic that has engaged both classical theorists such as Aristotle and contemporary public ethics scholars such as Rohr (1989) and Cooper (2006). However, where much of the global discourse draws from Western liberal traditions, this paper also asks how African communitarian ethics, especially Ubuntu, can reframe ethical leadership in the Nigerian context (Ewuoso & Hall, 2019).

Within Nigerian public administration, the challenge is not the absence of rules but the absence of moral ownership. Civil servants often follow codes out of fear of sanctions rather than inner conviction. The National Ethics and Integrity Policy (NEIP), launched in 2020 by the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) in collaboration with the Office of the Secretary to the Government of the Federation, offers a compelling framework of public service values: human dignity, voice and participation, integrity, patriotism, and professionalism (ICPC, 2020). Yet the policy still leans heavily on compliance mechanisms rather than cultivating a moral ecosystem that shapes public officials as ethical selves.

This tension echoes a broader debate in public ethics: should institutions aim merely to prevent wrongdoing through laws and sanctions, or should they promote virtue through cultural and moral development? Scholars such as Huberts (2021) argue that ethics management should move beyond rules toward the "integrity of public institutions," requiring ethical leadership as an organisational catalyst. From a normative standpoint, this paper contends that ethical leadership must be rooted in philosophical models of virtue ethics and relational accountability, particularly drawing from African thought systems (Okeke & Moyo, 2022; Boaheng, 2023).

Thus, this study's primary concern is not what public administrators must not do, but rather what they ought to become. Through theoretical engagement with classical virtue ethics, Ubuntu philosophy, and public service ethos, the paper explores how Nigeria can move toward proactive integrity, which is a model whereby ethical leadership and organisational culture are mutually reinforcing and rooted in both universal moral principles and indigenous ethical frameworks.

This philosophical and administrative inquiry is urgent. As Nigeria attempts to rebuild trust in public institutions amid growing disillusionment and administrative decay, reimagining leadership through the lens of virtue, integrity, and institutional ethics may no longer be optional; it is essential for societal survival.

Conceptual Foundation

Understanding the nature of ethical leadership in public administration requires clarity around key concepts: ethics, integrity, and organisational culture, and how they intersect philosophically and institutionally. This section builds a conceptual framework for the study by critically engaging these terms, highlighting their normative underpinnings, administrative relevance, and African ethical interpretations.

Ethics in Public Administration

At its core, ethics in public administration refers to the moral principles that guide the actions, decisions, and behaviour of public officials. It involves questions of duty, justice, fairness, and the public good. Traditional Western models draw from Kantian deontology, which emphasises duty-based actions, and utilitarianism, which promotes actions that maximize overall welfare (Frederickson & Ghere, 2020). However, in practice, the ethical terrain of public service often lies in the messy tension between rules and reality.

In Nigeria, public ethics is frequently reduced to anti-corruption rhetoric, emphasizing punitive measures rather than cultivating moral reasoning. Yet ethics must be more than fear of punishment; it should entail internalized moral standards. As Ezeani (2021) notes, many public officials navigate ethical ambiguity daily, not due to ignorance but due to institutionalized compromise and weak accountability structures. What then is the alternative to this ethical passivity?

Philosophically, virtue ethics provides an alternative. Rooted in Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics, virtue ethics emphasises character development and the cultivation of moral habits (Aristotle, trans. 2009). Rather than asking "What rules must I follow?", virtue ethics asks "What kind of person ought I be?" This question is deeply relevant to Nigeria's bureaucratic context, where systemic moral decay cannot be solved merely through compliance mechanisms.

Integrity

Integrity, while often used interchangeably with ethics, conveys a more holistic notion of consistency between values, actions, and identity. According to Huberts (2021), integrity in public administration should be seen as the quality of acting in accordance with relevant moral values, norms, and rules, even when unobserved. It thus implies internal conviction, not just external conformity.

In the Nigerian public sector, the National Ethics and Integrity Policy (NEIP) seek to institutionalize this value. However, its effectiveness depends on whether public servants see integrity as a lived norm rather than a regulatory expectation (ICPC, 2020). Philosophically, integrity aligns with existential and relational models of the self where individuals are not merely role-fillers but moral agents responsible for shaping the public good (Cooper, 2006; Ewuoso & Hall, 2019).

Furthermore, African communitarian ethics reinforces this relational dimension. Ubuntu, often summarized as "I am because we are," frames integrity as a relational virtue that sustains communal harmony and social trust. Thus, to act with integrity in public service is not merely to follow rules but to uphold the well-being of the community, including future generations (Boaheng, 2023).

Organisational Culture

Organisational culture refers to the shared values, norms, rituals, and symbols that shape behaviour within an institution (Schein, 2017). In public administration, it functions as an ethical ecology determining what behaviours are rewarded, tolerated, or punished. A corrupt organisational culture often normalises ethical shortcuts and valorises loyalty over competence or justice (Olowu, 2020).

Changing public administration in Nigeria thus requires more than reforming laws; it demands reshaping institutional cultures that currently valorise patronage, hierarchy, and silence. As Okeke and Moyo (2022) argue, African philosophical values such as communal accountability and participatory voice must be embedded in public institutions to regenerate trust and ethical resilience.

This paper, therefore, proposes that cultivating a proactive ethical culture requires a philosophical shift, that is, from control to character, from rules to relationships, and from fear to moral conviction. Only by attending to the deep cultural and ethical roots of public life can Nigerian administration truly embody integrity beyond compliance.

Having explored the philosophical foundations of ethics, integrity, and organisational culture, and critically evaluated the limitations of current public administration practices in Nigeria, the analysis now turns to constructing a normative framework for proactive integrity. This transition is necessary to move from diagnosing ethical challenges to offering grounded, context-sensitive solutions. Building on virtue ethics, African communitarian philosophy, and public ethics scholarship, the next section develops a model for ethical leadership and institutional culture that goes beyond policy rhetoric. It proposes practical mechanisms to embed moral agency and relational accountability at the heart of Nigerian public administration.

Ethical Leadership and Organisational Culture in Nigerian Public Administration

Ethical leadership in the Nigerian public sector is more than an ideal; it is a necessity in a system burdened by decades of corruption, institutional decay, and widespread public distrust. The call for a culture of integrity is not new; however, what distinguishes the current moment is the increasing recognition that compliance-based ethics mechanisms, such as codes of conduct, anti-corruption laws, and procedural audits, while important, are insufficient. What is needed is a shift towards proactive integrity, where ethical leadership becomes embedded in the everyday organisational culture of public service institutions.

The National Ethics and Integrity Policy (NEIP), introduced in 2020 by the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC), in collaboration with the Office of the Head of the Civil Service of the Federation, represents a critical step in institutionalising ethical values across all levels of public service (ICPC & OHCSF, 2020). It outlines core values such as human dignity, voice and participation, patriotism, personal responsibility, integrity, and national unity. Yet, the translation of these normative values into lived realities depends largely on leadership, not just at the top but throughout the bureaucracy.

A recent systematic review in the public sector found that leadership acts as a "cultural architect," where the specific style of a leader (transformational, ethical, or participatory) is a more significant driver of organisational culture and performance than formal bureaucratic silos or inertia (Muridzi, 2025). This study specifically highlights that in developing contexts, intentional leadership behaviour such as promoting trust and psychological safety is what successfully flattens rigid hierarchies, a task that formal policy alone often fails to achieve (Muridzi, 2025). Ethical leaders influence values, model behaviour, and create institutional incentives for ethical conduct (Lawton et al., 2020). In Nigeria, however, public administration is often entangled in patron-client networks that reward loyalty over competence and silence over dissent. This dynamic weakens efforts to build transparent and accountable institutions. As Adeyemi (2021) argues, public institutions in Nigeria frequently operate in ethical vacuums, where individual moral judgment is constrained by a permissive culture of impunity.

Furthermore, the absence of consistent accountability mechanisms and the politicization of the civil service diminish the capacity of ethical leadership to flourish. The deeply hierarchical and often opaque nature of public bureaucracies tends to suppress bottom-up initiatives for change. However, there is evidence that when ethical leadership is practiced consistently, as seen in select states and agencies that have adopted reforms with civil society participation, organisational culture begins to shift, and public trust improves (Okechukwu & Nwosu, 2022).

Philosophically, this aligns with the communitarian emphasis on relational responsibility and Ubuntu-style leadership that sees public officers not merely as agents of the state, but as custodians of the common good (Eze, 2023; Metz, 2022). An ethical leader in this view nurtures not only policy compliance but moral imagination, which is a capacity to envision and pursue justice within the constraints of everyday governance.

Therefore, cultivating ethical leadership in Nigeria requires more than anti-corruption rhetoric or punitive sanctions. It demands a deliberate investment in leadership development, values-based education, and participatory accountability. More importantly, it requires the reconstitution of public service as a moral vocation where institutions are designed not merely to enforce ethical codes, but to embody ethical purpose. This means that we need a shift in the way the bureaucracy is imagined in Nigeria. The next section will provide a historical searchlight on the bureaucratic legacy that is shaping public service in Nigeria.

Nigerian Historical-Bureaucratic Legacy

The Nigerian public service continues to operate within a bureaucratic framework inherited from its colonial past. British colonial administration introduced a rigid, hierarchical model of governance that prioritised control, documentation, and loyalty to the Crown over responsiveness, moral reasoning, or community accountability. This legacy birthed a bureaucratic ethos characterized by detachment, impersonal authority, and an overemphasis on procedure (Olaopa, 2021). Although the colonial masters have long departed, the bureaucratic culture they embedded continues to shape Nigeria's administrative logic, often to the detriment of ethical leadership.

One of the enduring consequences of this colonial imprint is the institutionalization of patronage networks, where loyalty to ethnic, religious, or political patrons frequently trumps professional competence and ethical merit. As Ikpe (2020) observes, these patron-client relations have become the moral grammar of bureaucratic survival, subtly rewarding silence, conformity, and complicity. The result is a civil service that is formally committed to public interest but informally governed by a calculus of self-preservation and group loyalty. This dual morality produces what some scholars like Asouzu have called "ethical ambivalence" (Asouzu, 2003), which is a condition in which public servants are caught between official codes and informal expectations (Agbaje, 2019).

Such a culture undermines the effectiveness of ethical reforms like the National Ethics and Integrity Policy (NEIP). While the NEIP promotes laudable values, its enforcement often collides with an entrenched organisational ethos that resists transparency and discourages whistleblowing. The policy may be adopted on paper, yet remain hollow in practice due to the absence of

internalized ethical transformation. As Adebayo and Akinrinade (2021) rightly argue, no code of ethics, however well crafted, can thrive in an institutional context where fear, favouritism, and fatalism persist as unofficial norms.

Moreover, the bureaucratic insulation that characterizes many Nigerian ministries and agencies makes it difficult for ethical leadership to trickle down. Ethical expectations are often top-down and performative, without robust systems for cultivating shared ethical ownership. Middle-level officers, the bridge between policy and street-level implementation, are frequently disengaged, underpaid, and disempowered, further frustrating ethical continuity across administrative levels (Okechukwu & Nwosu, 2022). Therefore, to address this quagmire, the Nigerian state proposes the National Ethics and Integrity Policy (NEIP). The next section will evaluate the strengths, limitations, and potential of NEIP as a philosophical text.

Evaluating the NEIP as Ethical Policy

When viewed beyond its bureaucratic function, the National Ethics and Integrity Policy may be appreciated as a philosophical intervention, which is an attempt to articulate the moral foundations of public life in Nigeria. Its core values include human dignity, patriotism, personal responsibility, voice and participation, integrity, transparency, and national unity, which echo both liberal-democratic ethics and indigenous African conceptions of communal responsibility. These values, though abstract, provide an aspirational blueprint for a morally grounded public administration.

Yet, a close reading of the NEIP also reveals certain philosophical limitations. The document is couched in technocratic language and heavily reliant on legalistic compliance structures. It frames ethics in terms of conduct regulation, institutional roles, and performance monitoring, all of which are important but insufficient. What is missing is a deeper relational understanding of ethics: one that emphasises human interconnectedness, mutual accountability, and the cultivation of virtuous dispositions.

This omission is particularly striking in an African context, where philosophical traditions such as Ubuntu or *Iwa* (in Yoruba moral thought) offer rich insights into what it means to be an ethical person and public servant. For instance, the Ubuntu principle of "I am because we are" could serve as a foundation for developing ethical training programs that centre on communal well-being, empathy, and restorative justice. Similarly, the African notion of leadership as stewardship rather than domination aligns with participatory governance models that the NEIP aspires to uphold (Eze, 2023; Metz, 2022).

Despite its technocratic framing, the NEIP holds philosophical potential if it is interpreted as a dialogical text, not just a regulatory manual but a cultural conversation. The values it promotes can be expanded and deepened through engagement with African ethical traditions. For example, human dignity could be infused with the notion of personhood in African philosophy, which is

earned through acts of moral responsibility and social contribution. Integrity could be viewed not merely as honesty in transactions but as moral coherence, which aligns with one's inner values with public action.

Integrating African moral thought into the implementation of the NEIP would not only enrich its content but also enhance its cultural legitimacy. Public servants would no longer see ethics as a distant compliance obligation, but as a familiar moral project rooted in shared cultural understandings. This shift requires interdisciplinary collaboration between public administrators, moral philosophers, and community leaders to ensure that ethics in governance is not merely procedural but transformational.

While the NEIP represents a commendable effort to reorient the moral compass of Nigerian public service, its success depends on more than institutional enforcement. It calls for a philosophical awakening that entails reimagining public service as a space of moral agency, cultural identity, and collective responsibility. Only then can the vision of proactive integrity transcend policy and take root in everyday administrative practice.

Toward a Normative Framework for Proactive Integrity

Building on the preceding critique of the NEIP and Nigerian bureaucratic culture, this section outlines a forward-looking model grounded in virtue ethics and communitarian values. This part of the paper outlines a normative framework that reconceptualizes ethical leadership and organisational culture in Nigerian public administration beyond procedural compliance. The framework builds on a synthesis of virtue ethics, institutional culture theory, and public administration ethics, reinterpreted through a relational and African communitarian lens. It shifts the ethical paradigm from control and surveillance toward internal moral development, civic participation, and exemplary leadership rooted in the values of integrity, responsibility, and service.

Ethical Leadership as Relational and Participatory

Ethical leadership, often defined as leadership guided by moral principles and concern for the common good, cannot thrive in isolation from the socio-cultural context and relationships that sustain public institutions (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015). In the Nigerian public service, leadership has historically been shaped by hierarchical and directive models, often reinforced by authoritarian colonial administrative legacies (Eze, 2023). However, a relational and participatory view of leadership aligns more closely with indigenous African moral philosophies such as Ubuntu, which emphasises interdependence, human dignity, and mutual responsibility (Metz, 2022).

Relational leadership demands that public leaders engage with citizens and civil servants not merely as subordinates or voters but as moral equals within a shared community. This participatory model requires openness to feedback,

collective decision-making, and the building of trust through consistent ethical conduct. It calls for a deeper internalisation of the values articulated in the National Ethics and Integrity Policy (NEIP), such as human dignity, justice, and service beyond the performative declarations in bureaucratic rituals (ICPC & OHCSF, 2020).

In this model, ethical leadership is not the privilege of high-ranking officials alone but is cultivated at all levels of administration through deliberate mentoring, moral modelling, and inclusion in ethical discourse (Asuquo & Akerele, 2020). As Cooper (2019) suggests, ethical governance must be lived out in micro-interactions, not just enshrined in macro-policies.

Organisational Culture as a Site for Virtue Cultivation

The moral atmosphere of public institutions profoundly shapes individual behaviour. Following Edgar Schein's (2017) institutional culture theory, organisational culture consists of shared assumptions, values, and symbols that guide behaviour over time. In Nigerian public administration, this culture has often been described as resistant to change, hierarchical, and permissive of ethical lapses due to entrenched patronage networks (Adeyemi, 2021). However, this culture can be reoriented to become a site for cultivating moral virtues. This paper advocates for a virtue-based approach to organisational ethics and culture.

A virtue-based approach to organisational ethics draws from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and African communitarian ethics that emphasise the development of character traits such as honesty, prudence, courage, and fairness through consistent practice and institutional reinforcement. In this framework, integrity is not only a rule to follow but a habitual disposition formed through communal reinforcement and ethical exemplarity.

Transforming organisational culture in Nigeria will require more than anti-corruption policies or codes of conduct. It necessitates embedding virtue ethics into everyday bureaucratic life, such as staff meetings, supervisory relationships, and performance appraisals, to promote ethical excellence that is recognised and rewarded. This implies that institutions must deliberately build an "ethical climate" that discourages moral disengagement and fosters pride in public service.

Embedding Integrity: Practical Mechanisms

To make proactive integrity sustainable, Nigerian public administration must adopt multidimensional mechanisms that embed ethical reflection and commitment across the civil service. These include:

- **Moral Education in the Civil Service:** Ethics training must go beyond legal compliance and workshop formalities. Drawing on John Rawls' idea of public reason and Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, ethical education

should be dialogical, reflective, and grounded in real-world dilemmas. This can be enhanced by integrating African moral philosophies into training modules such as the concept of *Omoluwabi* (a person of character) in Yoruba thought or *njirimara* (virtue) in Igbo culture. Recurrent ethical training should be participatory, case-based, and focused on cultivating moral judgment. This implies that ethical training must move beyond procedural manuals to include culturally resonant mentorship programs that model communal leadership.

- **Leadership Exemplarity:** Leadership by example is the most powerful tool for transforming ethical culture. Aristotle's notion of the *phronimos, the* practically wise person who exemplifies ethical living, remains relevant. In the Nigerian context, civil servants often look to their superiors to determine acceptable norms. When leaders cut corners, the moral tone of the institution collapses. Therefore, public leaders must embody the virtues they seek to instil: transparency in procurement, honesty in reporting, empathy in dealing with citizens, and consistency in enforcing standards. Institutions should also implement 360-degree ethical evaluations to assess moral credibility, not just technical competence.

- **Community Engagement and Voice:** Integrity in public service is reinforced when citizens feel ownership and can hold public officials accountable. Participatory feedback mechanisms such as citizen charters, town hall meetings, and anonymous reporting systems can help democratize ethics and reduce bureaucratic opacity. African political thought emphasises communal consensus and the moral obligations of leaders to the governed. As such, accountability should not only be upward (to supervisors or institutions) but outward (to communities and stakeholders). This reinforces the Ubuntu principle: "I am because we are," implying that ethical action is deeply relational and socially situated.

A Synthesis: A Normative Model for Proactive Integrity

Bringing these elements together, we propose a normative model that integrates:

- Virtue Ethics (Aristotle and Ubuntu): Focus on moral character, habituation, and community-oriented leadership. While Aristotle emphasises habituated moral character through reason, Ubuntu brings relational responsibility and communal affirmation into view, together offering a dual axis for ethical leadership in African bureaucratic settings.

- Institutional Culture Theory (Schein; March & Olsen) emphasises the need for structural and symbolic change to embed shared ethical values.

- Public Administration Ethics (Cooper, Denhardt): Stresses democratic accountability, ethical reasoning, and civic professionalism.

This hybrid framework promotes proactive integrity through inner moral development (character), institutional embedding (culture), and participatory engagement (community). It moves public ethics from compliance to conviction, from control to character, and from rule enforcement to relational responsiveness. In this model, public servants are not merely rule-followers but moral agents embedded in communities of meaning and responsibility.

This normative vision also responds to the limitations of the NEIP, which, while commendable, tends to adopt a technocratic tone. By infusing the policy with philosophical depth, relational ethics, and cultural context, it can evolve from a compliance tool into a transformative framework that speaks to the Nigerian moral imagination.

Having articulated a normative model grounded in virtue ethics, relational leadership, and culturally embedded moral education, it becomes necessary to reflect on the broader philosophical and policy implications of this framework. The movement from theoretical design to institutional application requires more than structural reform; it demands a fundamental rethinking of what civil service represents in a democratic society. The next section explores how civil service reform can be reframed as a project of ethical formation, how governance can be realigned toward values rather than mere codes, and how philosophy and the humanities can rehumanize public service in Nigeria.

Philosophical and Policy Implications

A robust philosophical reorientation of public administration in Nigeria demands a shift in how we perceive ethics within institutional spaces. Rather than treating civil service reform as a primarily technocratic exercise, this paper argues for an approach that centres ethical formation as the bedrock of public sector transformation. Such a reframing positions public administration not only as a set of functional processes but as a moral enterprise rooted in the flourishing of the polity and the dignity of its citizens.

Reframing Civil Service Reform as Ethical Formation

Current reform agendas in Nigeria, including the National Ethics and Integrity Policy (NEIP), often emphasize compliance, transparency mechanisms, and accountability measures. While these are crucial, they remain inadequate in the absence of deep ethical commitment. As scholars like Pam (2026) and Ayoade (2019) point out, institutional reform in Nigeria repeatedly falters not for lack of codes, but due to a deficit in moral agency within the civil service. To address this, civil service reform must be reconceptualized as a process of ethical cultivation, akin to what MacIntyre (2007) describes as the development of "practices that internalize virtue."

This moral turn demands a systemic shift from focusing on what is procedurally right to also cultivating a public ethos that emphasises who the public servant becomes. Institutions, in this sense, must be viewed as moral

communities where identity, character, and communal obligation intersect with technical expertise.

From Compliance Codes to Value-Based Governance

The NEIP sets out commendable values such as integrity, patriotism, and human dignity. However, these values must be actualized beyond symbolic codification. Value-based governance offers an alternative by embedding ethical norms into the operational fabric of public institutions. According to Denhardt & Denhardt (2021), this involves the creation of enabling environments where values are continually reflected upon, modelled by leadership, and translated into the everyday routines and language of administration.

In Nigeria's public sector, this means rethinking organisational culture, incentive structures, and institutional leadership. It also requires cultivating deliberative spaces where ethical reflection becomes part of policy design and administrative learning, thereby replacing an "audit culture" with a reflective culture. Ethical policies must not be top-down mandates alone; they must emerge from dialogue with the ethical aspirations of civil servants and citizens alike.

Role of Education, Philosophy, and the Humanities in Public Service

The technocratic leanings of civil service training, dominated by law, finance, and administrative procedures, should be complemented by a humanistic curriculum that includes ethics, philosophy, and cultural studies. As Osakwe (2023) argues, ethical literacy in the public sector is inseparable from civic consciousness. Philosophy, in particular, fosters critical self-reflection, moral reasoning, and the capacity to deliberate about values in a pluralistic society.

Incorporating Ubuntu philosophy or similar African moral systems into public service education could instil a relational ethic rooted in community, empathy, and mutual responsibility (Letseka, 2020). This goes beyond generic moral instruction to cultivate public servants who are attuned to the ethical needs and aspirations of the communities they serve. An Ubuntu-inflected public servant does not merely follow rules; they seek harmony, justice, and dignity for all.

Building Ethical Institutions through Moral Imagination

In the long run, ethical transformation in Nigerian public administration requires more than policies; it demands moral imagination. This is the capacity to envision institutions not only as bureaucracies but as vehicles for justice, care, and the common good. Martha Nussbaum (2020) and John Paul Lederach (2005) both emphasize that moral imagination is foundational to reimagining institutions beyond their current limitations. In the Nigerian context, where distrust in public institutions runs deep, moral imagination provides the visionary grounding for building legitimacy through virtue.

Such an approach invites policymakers, educators, and civil servants to ask: What kind of society are we building? What virtues should guide our governance? How do our institutions reflect the moral aspirations of the people? These questions are philosophical but deeply political, and they are essential to developing institutions that not only enforce ethics but also embody them.

The foregoing analysis has reimagined Nigerian public administration as a moral project, enriched by philosophical inquiry, African communitarian ethics, and proactive integrity. The philosophical and policy reflections offered provide a compelling vision for embedding ethical leadership within institutional routines and civic expectations.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that ethical transformation in Nigerian public administration requires a shift from rule-based compliance to proactive integrity, which is an approach grounded in moral agency, relational accountability, and cultural legitimacy. Drawing from the philosophical foundations of virtue ethics and African communitarianism, particularly Ubuntu, we proposed that ethical leadership must go beyond procedural enforcement to cultivate moral character, public trust, and institutional coherence.

We began by outlining the conceptual terrain, such as ethics, integrity, and organisational culture, by emphasizing that ethical conduct should arise from internalized values, not merely external regulations. This led to a critical evaluation of Nigeria's bureaucratic culture and the National Ethics and Integrity Policy (NEIP), where we identified the limits of technocratic and legalistic models in a context shaped by colonial legacies and patron-client norms. The NEIP, while commendable, requires philosophical deepening and cultural integration to become a transformative force.

In response, this article advances a normative framework for proactive integrity built on three core proposals:

- Relational and Participatory Ethical Leadership – inspired by Ubuntu and virtue ethics, to foster trust and shared responsibility.
- Organisational Culture as a Site for Virtue Cultivation – where ethical habits are formed through institutional reinforcement and moral exemplarity.
- Practical Mechanisms for Embedding Integrity – including values-based moral education, leadership by example, and participatory community engagement.

- Philosophically, this framework insists that public servants are not just implementers of policy but moral agents embedded in communities of meaning. Politically, it reimagines public institutions as spaces for ethical formation and civic trust.

In the long run, the future of Nigerian public administration depends not only on better laws or policies, but on cultivating leaders and institutions that embody integrity from within. By integrating indigenous moral philosophies with contemporary ethical theory, we can lay the foundation for a civil service that not only enforces ethics but lives it, reclaiming public service as a moral vocation and a vehicle for societal renewal.

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