



# Ethical Leadership as a Foundation for Public Sector Performance

Kris Dobie

February 2026

building an  
**ethical**  
SOCIETY

# Core ethics concepts and distinctions

© Ethics Institute of South Africa



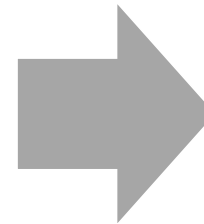
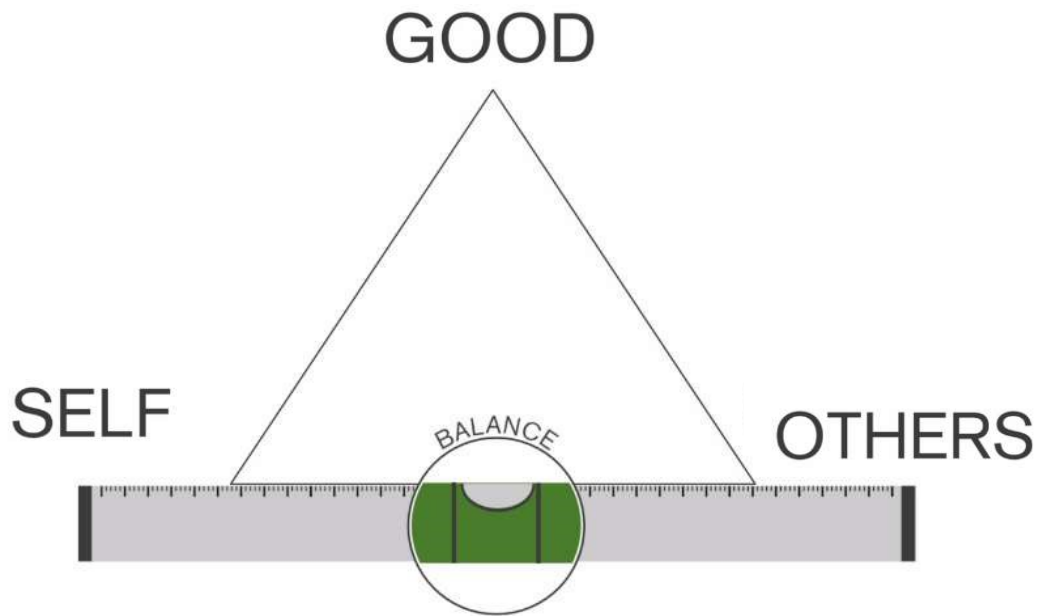
## Ethics poll

1. Are you an ethical person?
2. Do you work for an ethical organisation?
3. Do you live in an ethical country?

## Ethics a shared meaning

### Golden rule:

“Do unto others as you would want them to do to you.”



## Basic values and principles governing public administration

195. (1) Public administration must be governed by the democratic values and principles enshrined in the Constitution, including the following principles:
- (a) A high standard of professional ethics must be promoted and maintained.
  - (b) Efficient, economic and effective use of resources must be promoted.
  - (c) Public administration must be development-oriented.
  - (d) Services must be provided impartially, fairly, equitably and without bias.
  - (e) People's needs must be responded to, and the public must be encouraged to participate in policy-making.
  - (f) Public administration must be accountable.
  - (g) Transparency must be fostered by providing the public with timely, accessible and accurate information.
  - (h) Good human-resource management and career-development practices, to maximise human potential, must be cultivated.
  - (i) Public administration must be broadly representative of the South African people, with employment and personnel management practices based on ability, objectivity, fairness, and the need to redress the imbalances of the past to achieve broad representation.



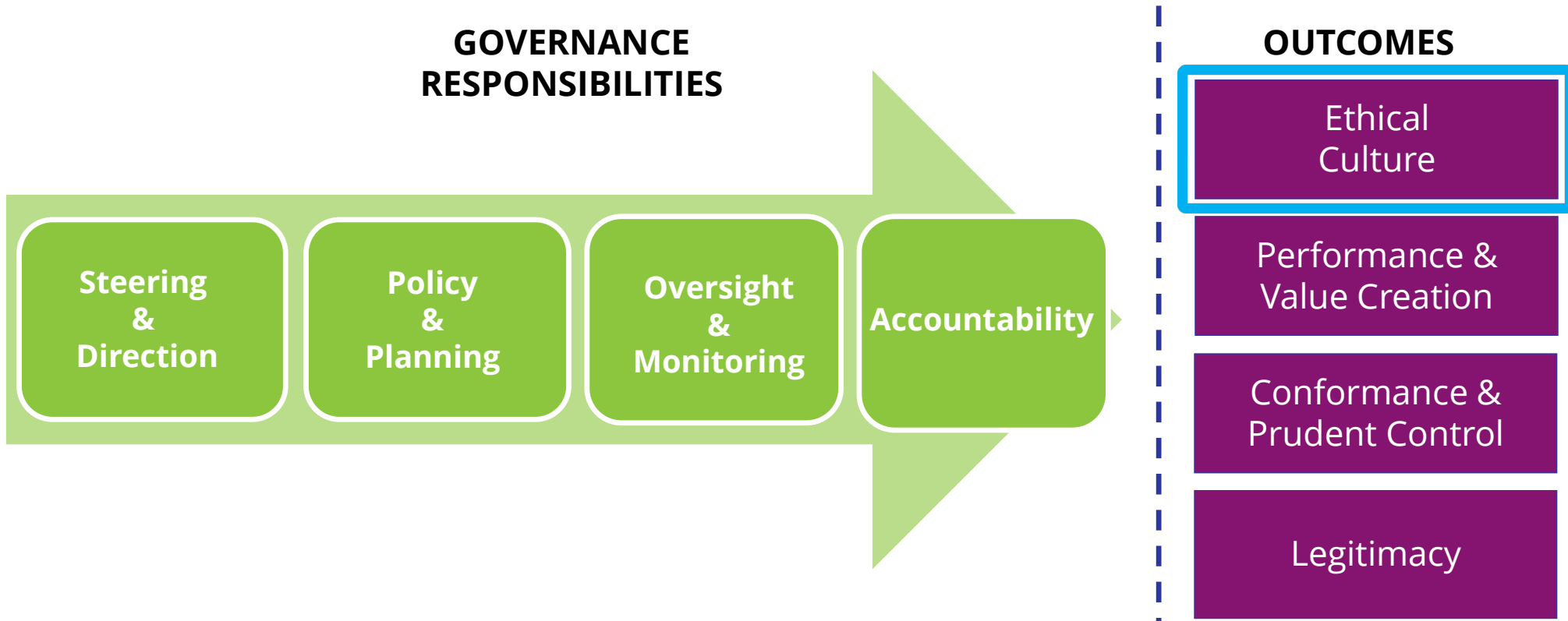
## King V™ definition of corporate governance



The exercise of **ethical** and **effective** leadership by the governing body towards the realisation of the following governance outcomes for the organisation within its economic, social and environmental context:

- **Ethical Culture;**
- Performance and Value Creation;
- Conformance and Prudent Control;
- Legitimacy.

# King V™ Corporate Governance Framework





<b>Ethical</b>	Yellow	Green
<b>Unethical</b>	Red	Yellow
	<b>Incompetent</b>	<b>Competent</b>

# Leadership

**PRINCIPLE 1:** The governing body leads ethically and effectively as the focal point of corporate governance in the organisation.

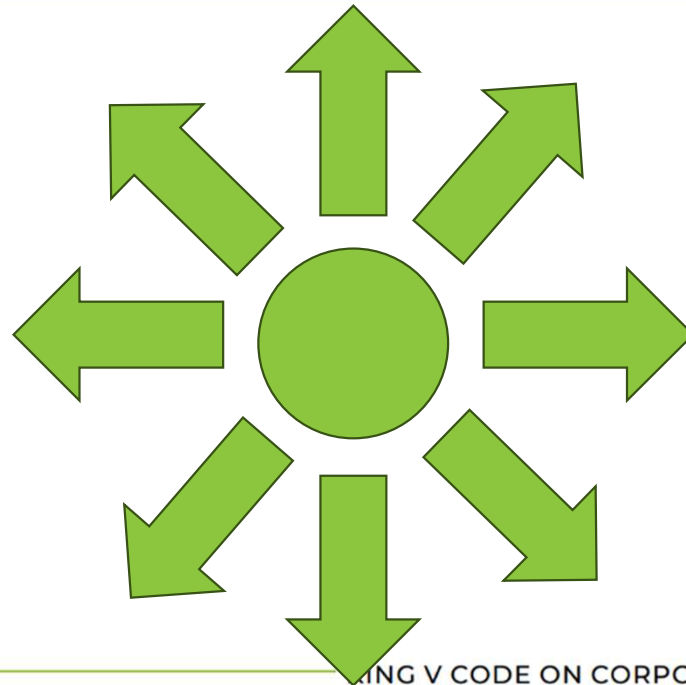
## Characteristics and values

- Integrity
- Competence
- Responsibility
- Accountability
- Fairness
- Transparency



# Ethics

**PRINCIPLE 2:** The governing body governs the ethics of the organisation in a way that enables an ethical culture and responsible corporate citizenship.



## Levels of ethical leadership

### 1. Individual level

- Personal morality

### 2. Relationship level

- Interpersonal ethics

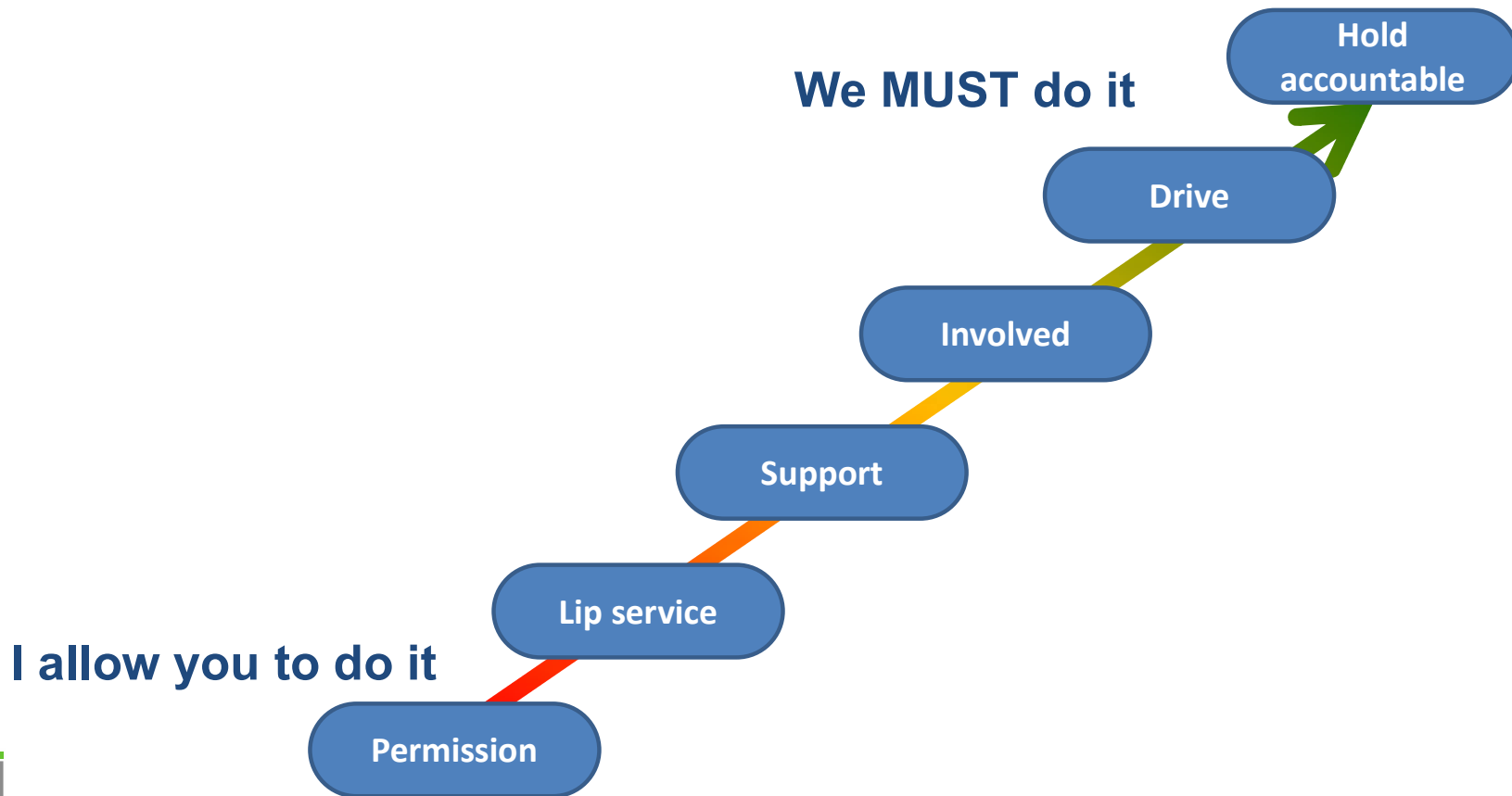
### 3. Organisational level

- Structural support

### 4. Strategic level

- Embed ethics in strategy

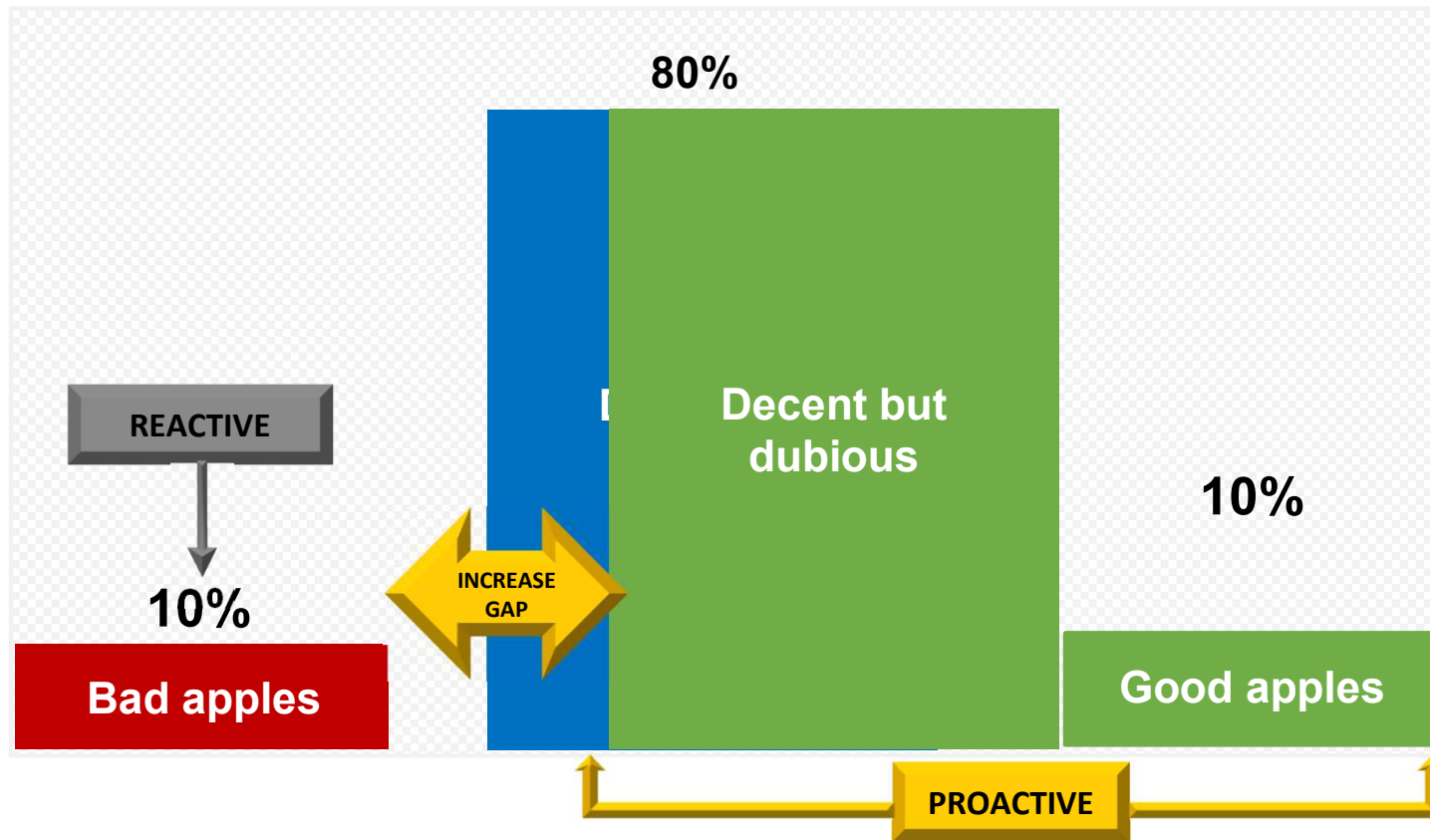
## Levels of leadership commitment to ethics



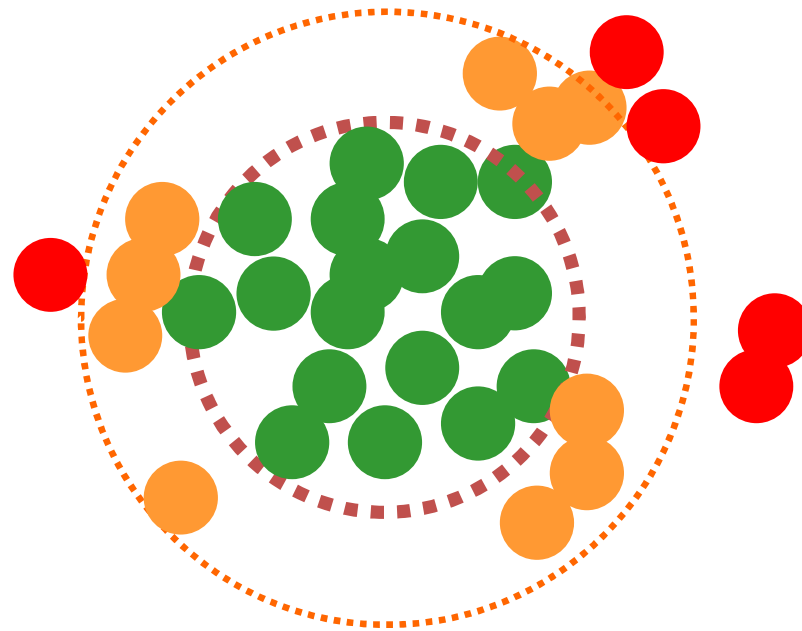


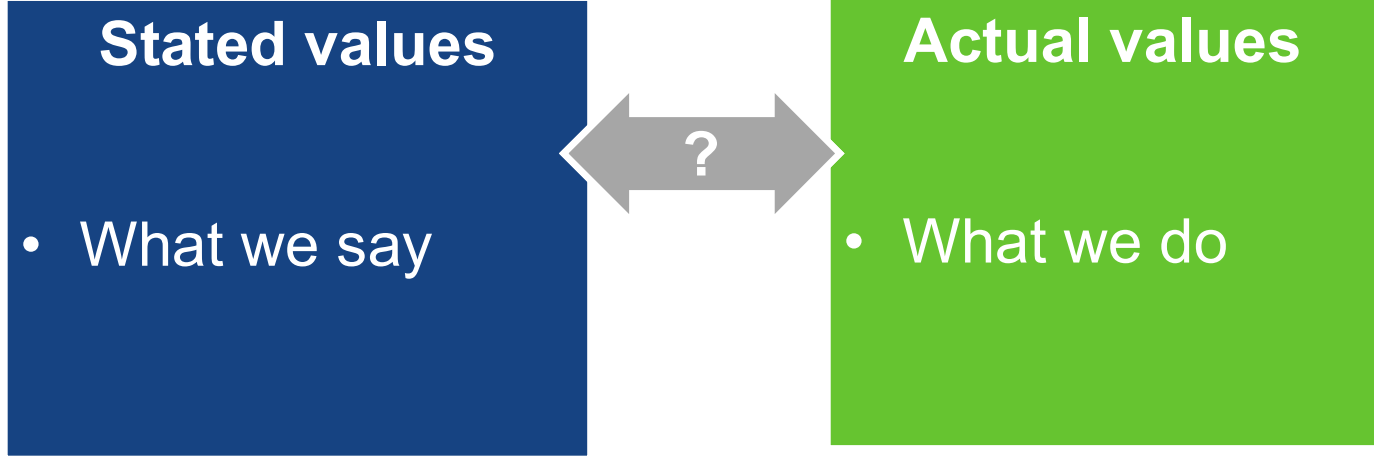
**How easy is it to *do the right thing* (be ethical) in this organisation?**

# Ethical culture



# Management responsibility





# Public Sector ETHICS SURVEY 2024

Ethics Survey of National, Provincial  
and Local Government

January 2025



The Ethics Institute in collaboration with:



**the dpsa**

Department:  
Public Service and Administration  
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

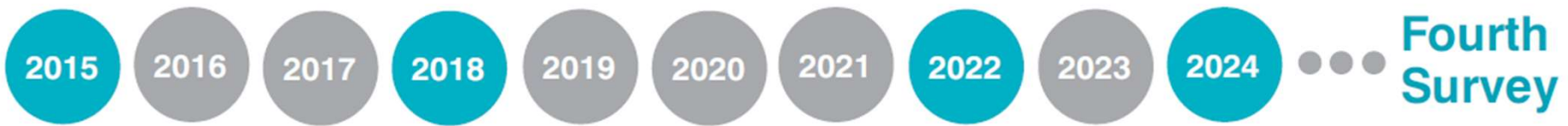


**cooperative  
governance**

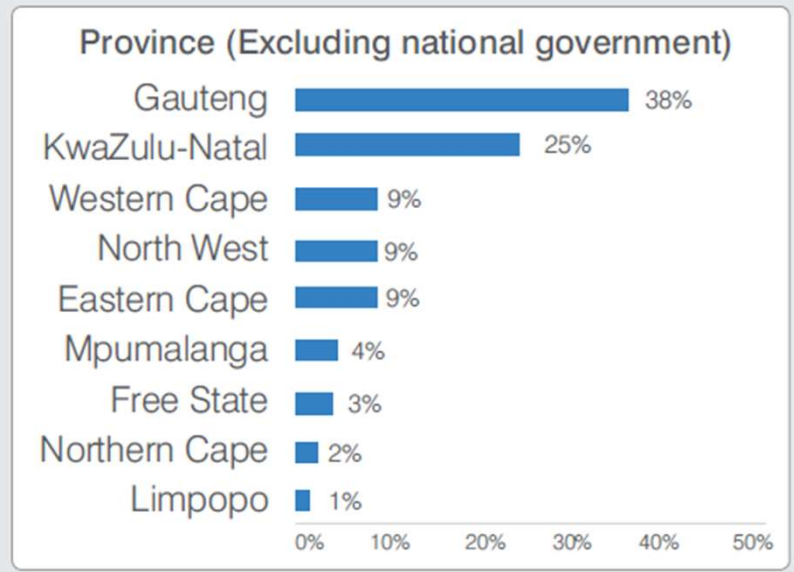
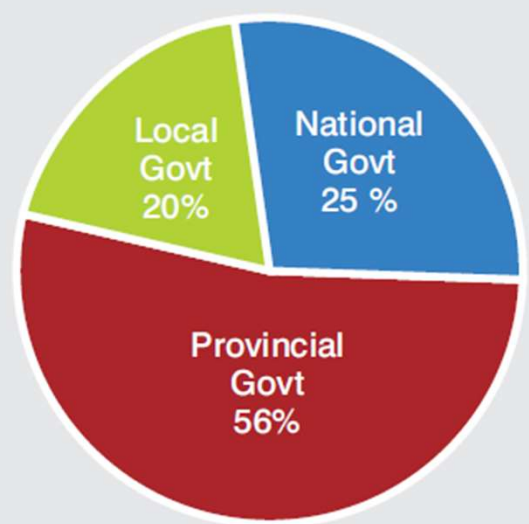
Department:  
Cooperative Governance  
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



building an  
**ethical  
SOCIETY**



**7 156**  
Participants



## Ethical behaviour risk

- To what extent does the following occur in your organisation on a scale from 'Never' to 'Very frequently'.

<b>Low risk</b>	<b>0 – 33</b>
<b>Moderate risk</b>	<b>34 – 49</b>
<b>High risk</b>	<b>50 – 66</b>
<b>Severe risk</b>	<b>67 – 100</b>

1	Inconsistency in the application of rules / discipline	56
2	Victimisation of employees who differ with managers	55
3	Abuse of time	55
4	No consequences for unethical behaviour	52
5	Incompetent / unqualified people being appointed	51
6	Jobs being given to family members and friends	50
7	People being at work, but not working	50
8	Abuse of resources for personal matters	50
9	Political interference	49
10	Abuse of "cadre deployment"	49
11	Abuse of discipline management to get rid of honest employees	48

12	Not adhering to policies and procedures / Bypassing policies and procedures	48
13	Giving contracts to family, friends or 'connected' individuals	47
14	Private work interfering with official duties	38
15	Staff receiving bribes or kickbacks	36
16	Cheating on claims / allowances	35
17	Disrespectful treatment of the public	30
18	Inappropriate acceptance of gifts	24
19	Sextortion	24
20	Sexual harassment	23
<b>AVERAGE</b>		<b>44</b>

Ethical culture indicator		RISK
1	People can report unethical practices without fear of retaliation	38
2	Decisions affecting people are made fairly	42
3	People are comfortable approaching their managers with ethical matters	42
4	People are allowed to question the decisions of their superiors	43
5	People are appreciated	43
6	Peoples' rights are considered	47
7	Senior managers (levels 13 and above) are held accountable if they break ethical rules	47
8	People know how to report unethical behaviour	47
9	There is respect for people	49
10	Senior management deal with unethical behaviour effectively	49

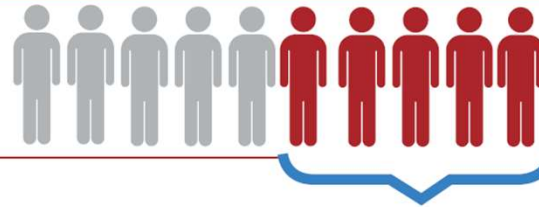
# Reporting misconduct

## SA Public Sector

## SA Private Sector

### Reporting misconduct

“Have you observed misconduct?”



**YES**

47%

34%

“Did you report the misconduct you observed?”



**YES**

40%

79%

“Did you report the misconduct you observed?”



YES

40%

“Why did you not report misconduct?”

TOP 3

I didn't feel anything would be done about it	86%
I didn't believe I could report confidentially	81%
I believed I would be victimised	81%

“Where did you report the misconduct?”

TOP 3

My direct manager/supervisor	87%
Another manager/supervisor	57%
HR function	50%





## 'The one thing to improve the ethical culture in the public sector'

Themes derived from more than 5 000 verbatim comments from public servants.

Sample comments shown



Persons who are found to be unethical should be announced ... so it can scare others from doing something similar.

Punish the wrongdoers or perpetrators of corruption, or else all government programmes are going to become a mockery. We are sick and tired of corrupt officials who operate with such high levels of 'impunity'!

At present it's like a circus where everyone gets away with everything because nothing is ever done.

Senior managers are not exemplary in their behaviour and actions, creating great challenges in how they influence future leaders. 'If you lie down with dogs, you wake up with fleas!'

We need honest managers who'll separate politics from management duties.

A political will to do so. People with ability and clean hands. This is not rocket science guys.



## Result differences based on audit outcomes

**Organisations  
with clean  
audits**

More ethics training  
More supportive ethical culture  
More accountability - Less misconduct  
**Better service delivery!**

1

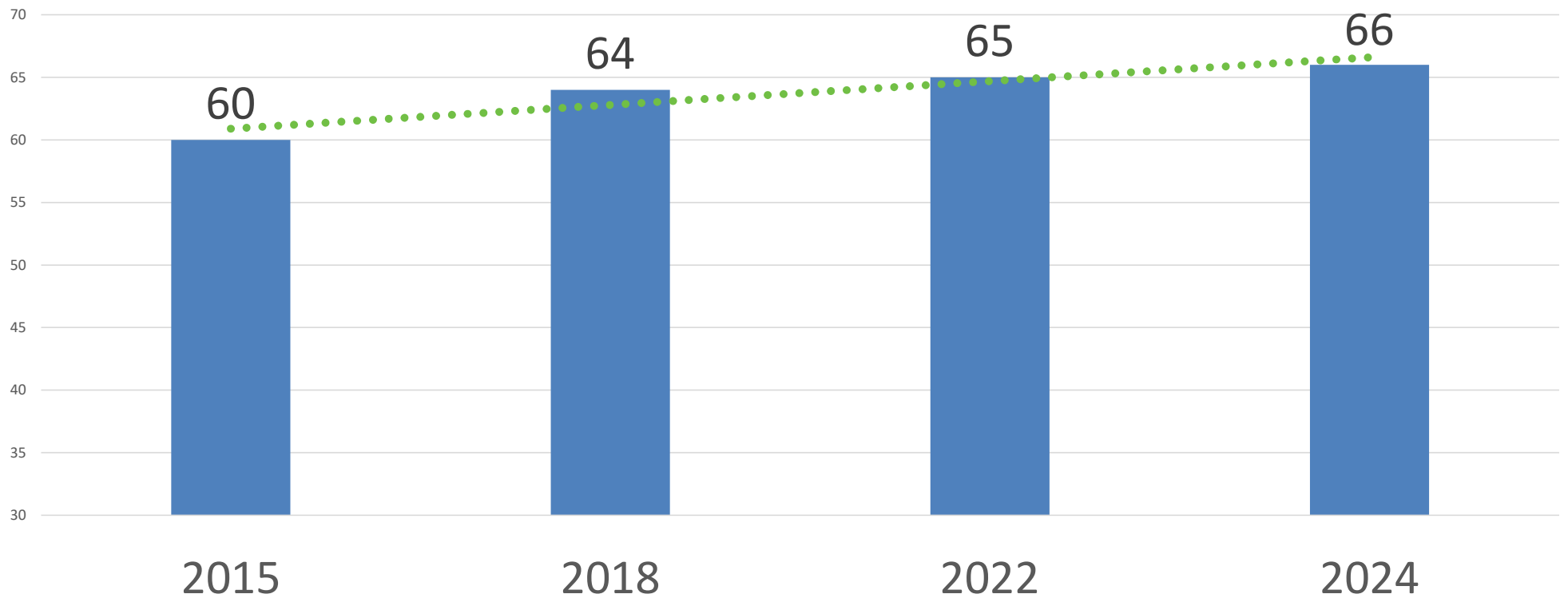
2

3

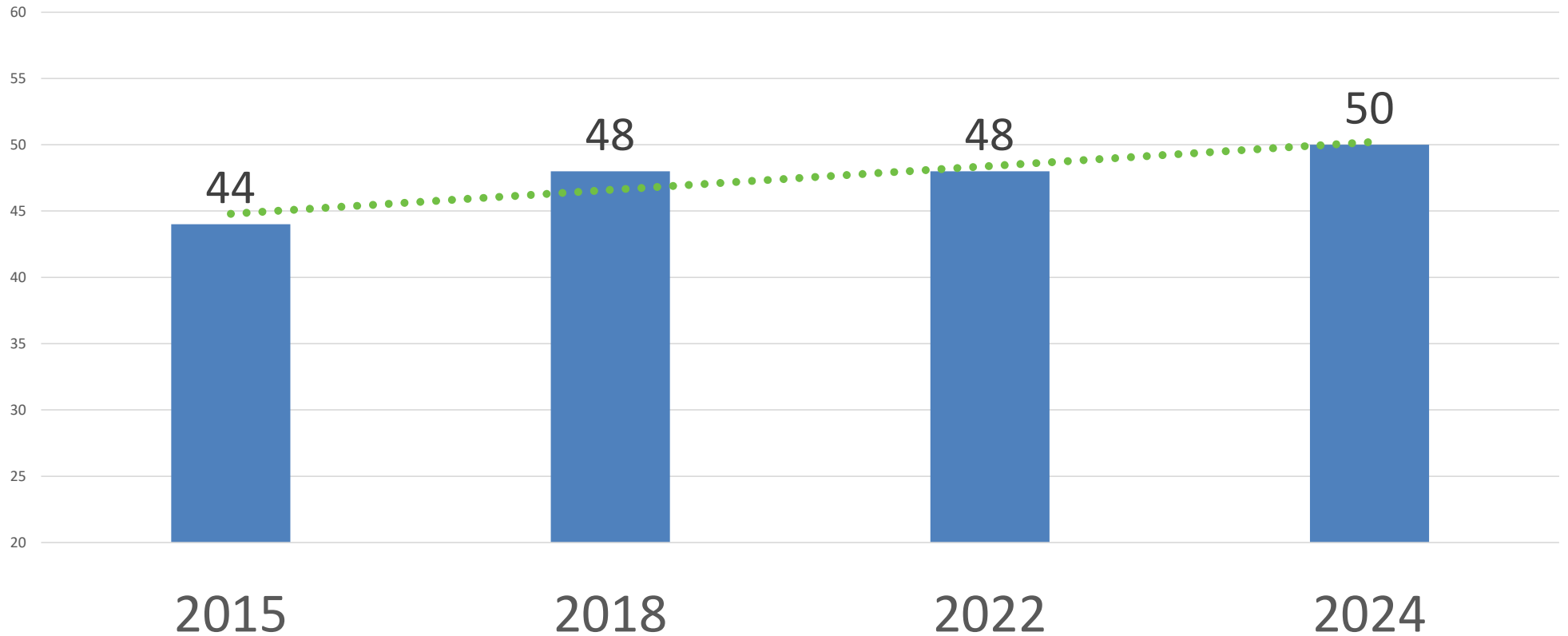
**Organisations  
with adverse  
/ disclaimer  
audits**

More appointment of  
incompetent staff  
More corruption and serious  
misconduct

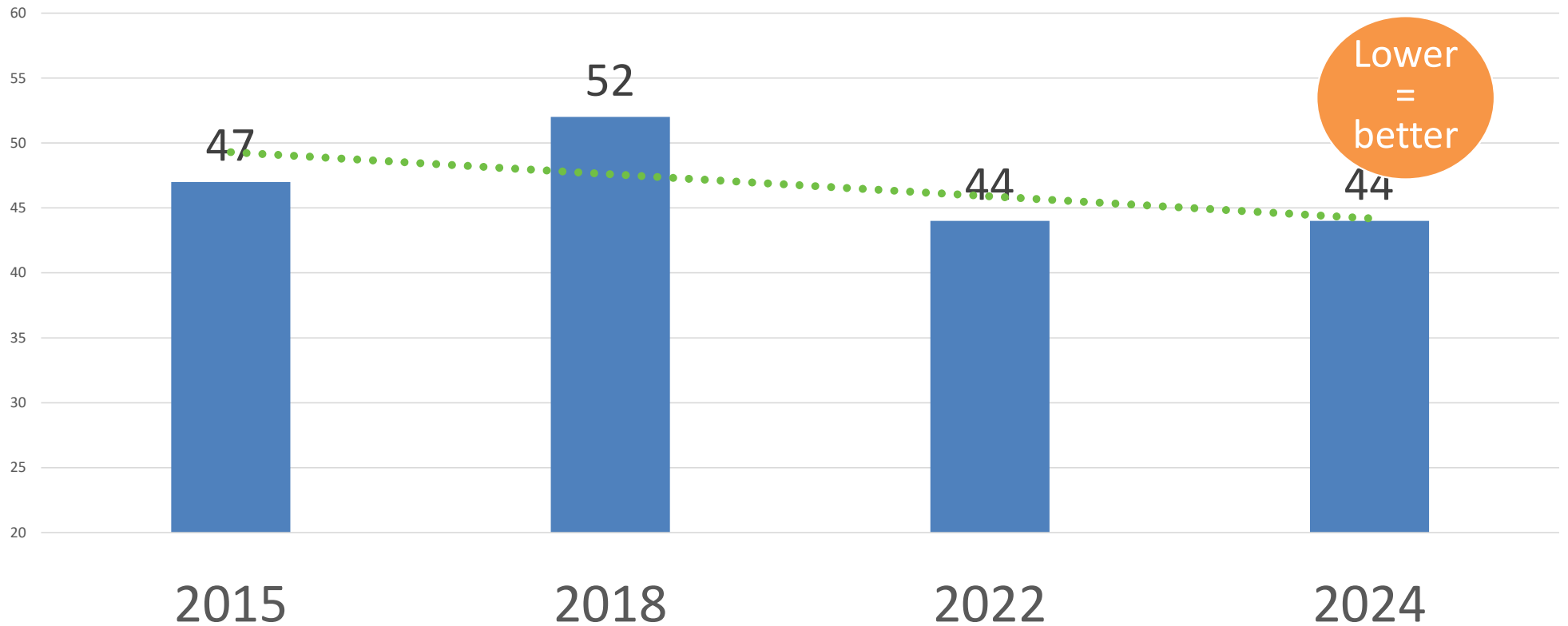
# Awareness of ethics initiatives



# Supportive ethical culture



# Awareness of unethical conduct



# Local Government **ETHICAL LEADERSHIP** — Initiative —

In partnership with:



**cooperative  
governance**  
Department:  
Cooperative Governance  
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



**moral regeneration movement**

building an  
**ethical  
SOCIETY**

## Code for Ethical Leadership in Local Government

# What should ethical leadership look like in local government?

## Integrity

Being guided by strong values and morals

Setting an example

## Community centredness

Serving the community. "People first."

## Diligence

Being committed and passionate

Being competent

## Accountability

Being accountable & ensuring accountability

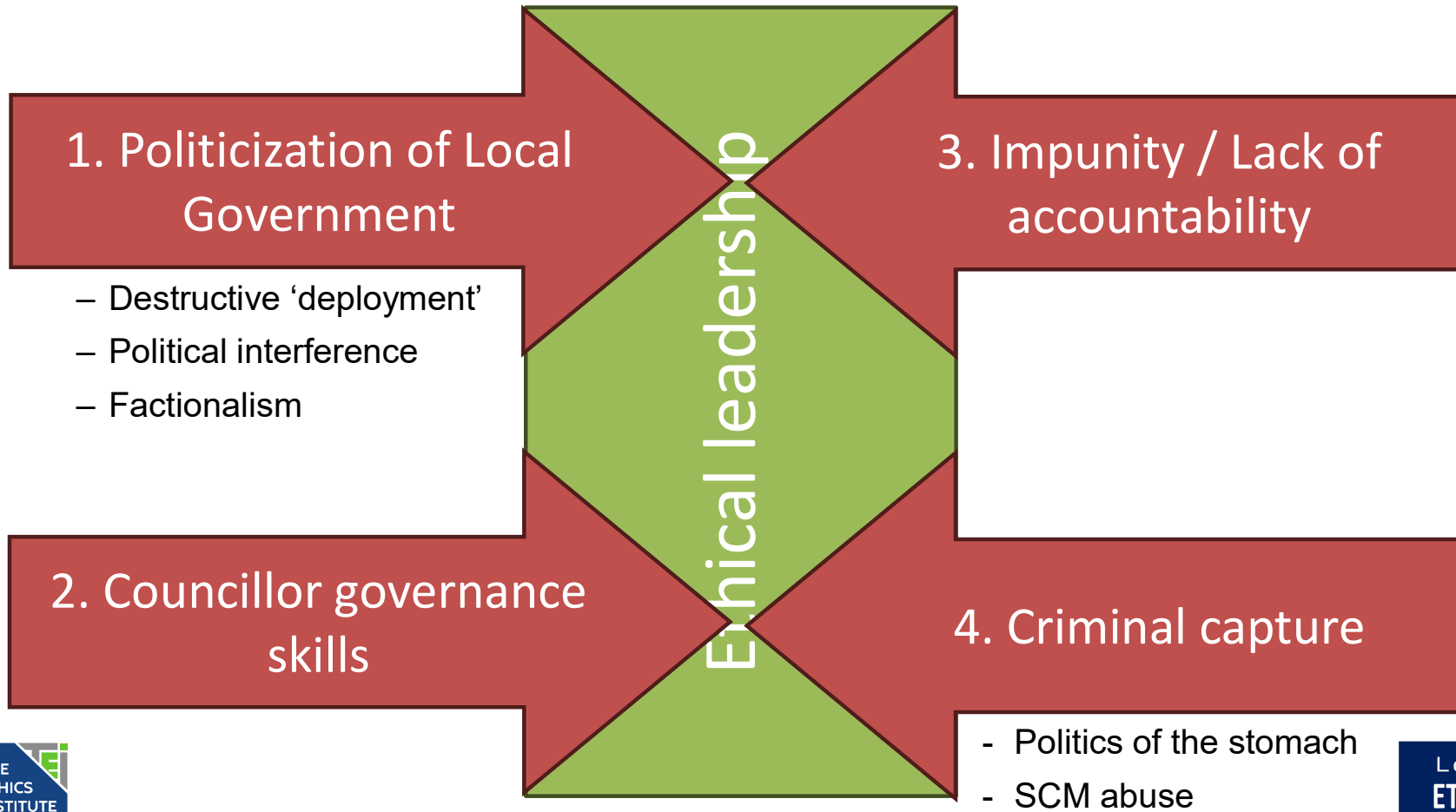
Ensuring good governance and compliance

## Courage

Being courageous

## What makes ethical leadership difficult in LG?

© The Ethics Institute



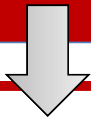
**To what extent do you agree that the following undermines ethical leadership in your municipality?**



	<b>Adverse / disclaimer audit</b>	<b>Difference</b>	<b>Unqualified / clean audit</b>
Appointment of officials with political connections rather than skills	<b>73</b>	<b>-21</b>	<b>53</b>
Interference from political party branches in council / the administration	<b>68</b>	<b>-16</b>	<b>52</b>
Appointment of political party office-bearers in the administration	<b>66</b>	<b>-19</b>	<b>47</b>
Lack of education, skills and qualifications among officials	<b>65</b>	<b>-23</b>	<b>42</b>
Unlawful instructions from councillors to officials	<b>65</b>	<b>-22</b>	<b>43</b>
Unlawful instructions from senior managers to officials	<b>57</b>	<b>-18</b>	<b>40</b>

# How to address challenges

Research



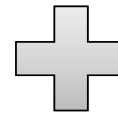
Identify challenges



Hard controls



Traditional internal controls (policies and procedures)



Code for Ethical Leadership in Local Government

An initiative of The Ethics Institute in partnership with:

THE ETHICS INSTITUTE

cooperative governance  
Department of Cooperative Governance  
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

8 SALGA  
Inspiring service delivery

local regeneration resources

**Code for Ethical  
Leadership in  
Local  
Government**



---

**PRINCIPLES:**  
**How do we achieve what we want?**

## PRINCIPLES:

How do we achieve what we want?

**Principle 1:** An ethical municipal leader sets the tone for an ethical culture

**Principle 2:** An ethical municipal leader follows a community-centred approach to governance

**Principle 3:** An ethical municipal leader respects the boundary between the political and administrative spheres of the municipality

**Principle 4:** An ethical municipal leader ensures the appointment of staff who have competence and integrity

**Principle 5:** An ethical municipal leader ensures the appropriate level of competence, integrity, and diversity on committees and oversight structures

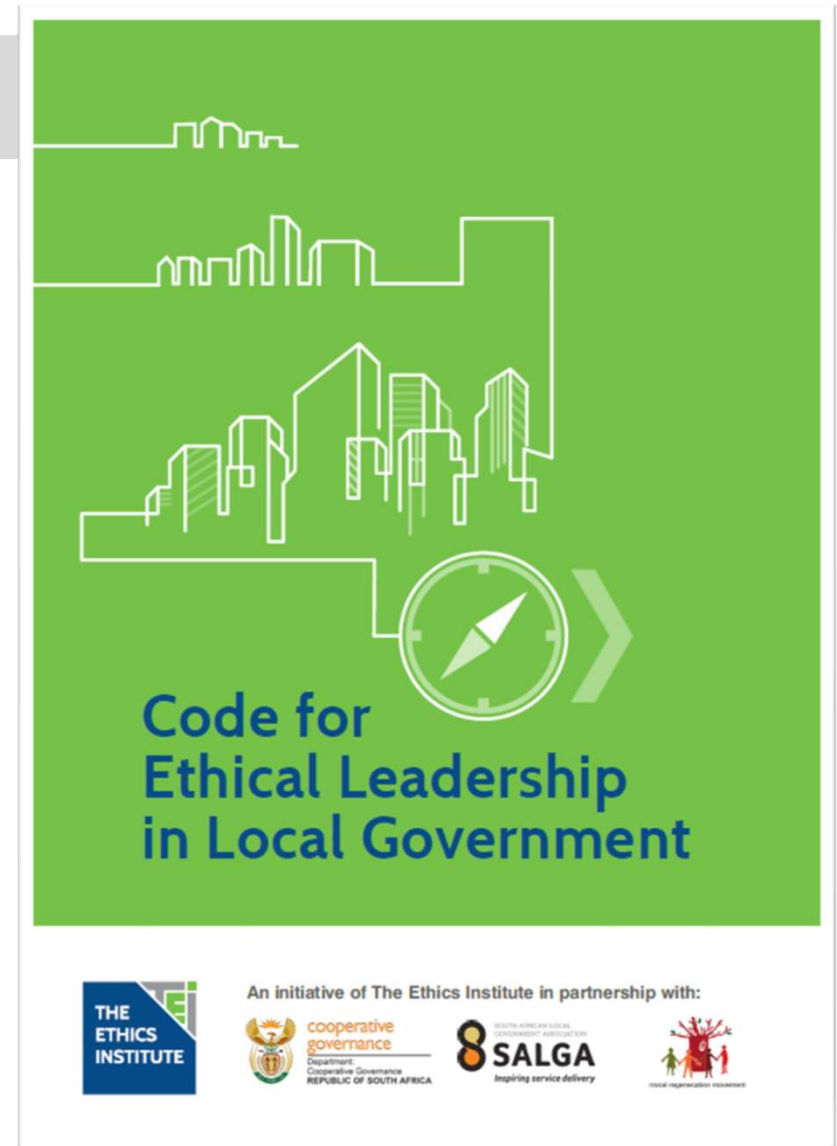
**Principle 6:** An ethical municipal leader deals fairly and decisively with ethics transgressions and poor performance

**Principle 7:** An ethical municipal leader engages respectfully and constructively with other leaders

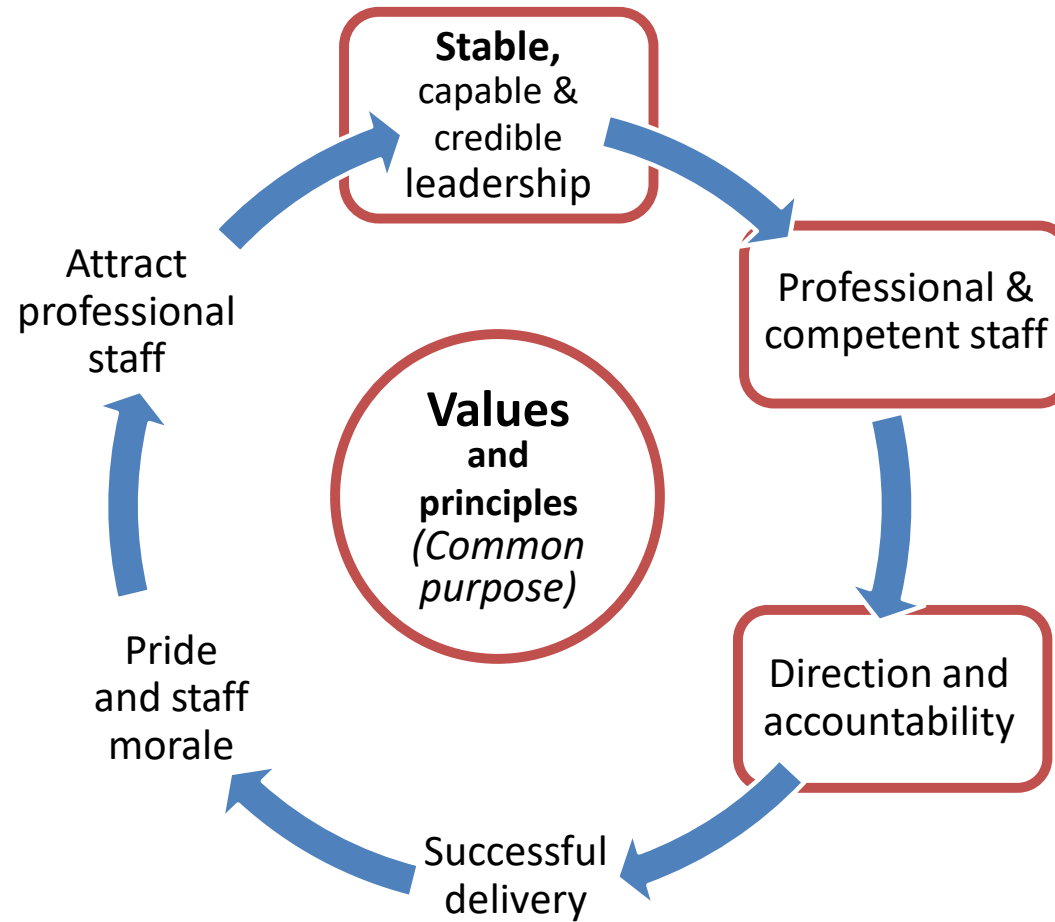
SPIRIT

OUTCOMES

Download at:  
[www.tei.org.za/lgeli](http://www.tei.org.za/lgeli)



## Values driven PS 'Flywheel'



## Importance of stable leadership

- Avoid short-term thinking.
- Protect the administration against politicisation
- Ensure appointment of ethical and competent staff
- Build alliances with committed individuals

# 1. Develop a professional public sector

## a) Enable and unlock ethical leadership.

- i. The appointment process for top managers must be reviewed to ensure stable credible leadership.
- ii. The ethics competence of managers needs to be developed through training. This includes the cognitive, behavioural and managerial competence for ethics.

## b) Appoint competent and professional staff.

- i. Strong measures are needed to ensure staff competence.

## c) Improve accountability.

- i. Interventions are required to ensure strengthened capacity for investigations and disciplinary procedures.
- ii. There should be strengthened oversight of serious misconduct investigations.
- iii. Successes should be communicated to ensure that justice is not only done, but seen to be done.

### **2. Elevate the strategic importance of ethics**

**a) Facilitate a national dialogue on ethical leadership in the public sector.**

**b) Build ethics infrastructure in departments.**

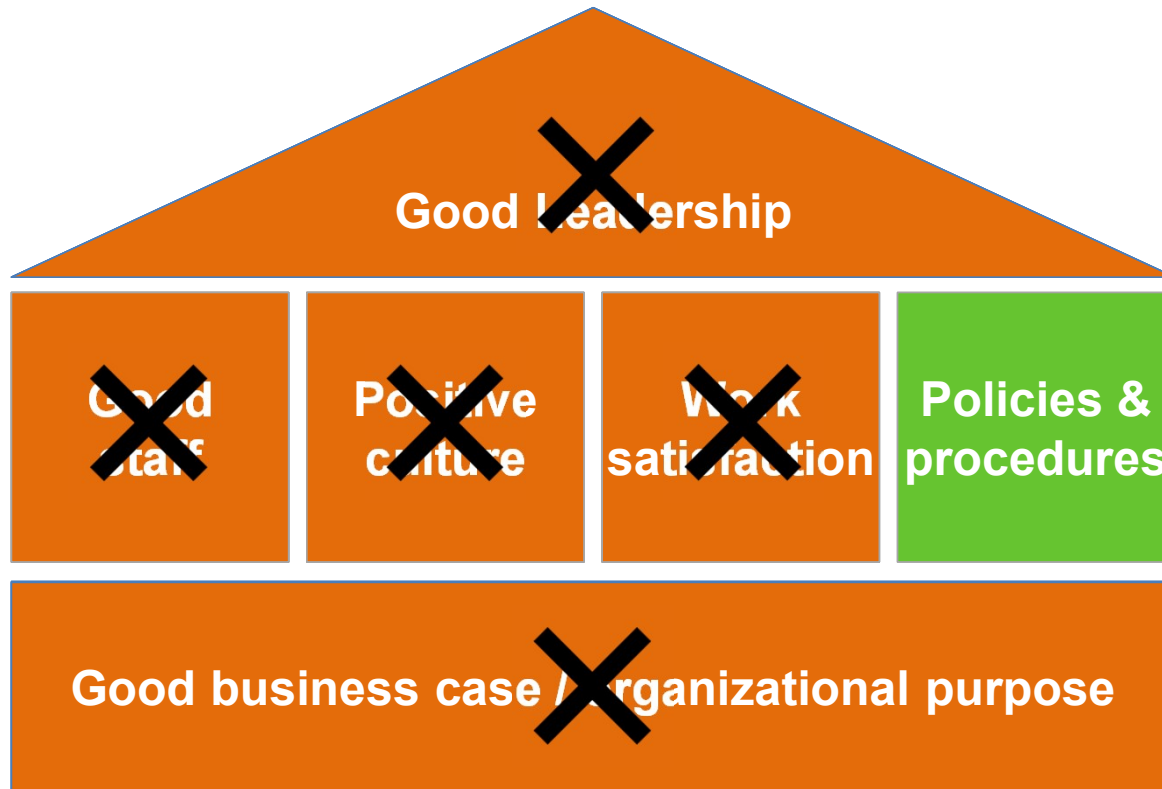
- i. Ethics officers, ethics committees and ethics champions should be supported to run ethics programmes that address the strategic issues identified in this survey.
- ii. The efforts to build ethics infrastructure in organisations should be continued and strengthened.

**c) Strengthen the focus on ‘culture work’.**

**d) Capacitate organisations to respond to whistleblowing.**

- i. The DPSA and CoGTA should monitor the implementation of whistle-blowing response systems in departments and municipalities.
- ii. A public service-wide information management system for reported cases should be considered to improve the transparency of disciplinary matters.

## Building a failed organisation





# Thank you

The Ethics Institute is an independent public benefit institute producing original thought leadership and offering a range of services and products related to organisational ethics.



[info@tei.org.za](mailto:info@tei.org.za)



[The Ethics Institute](https://www.facebook.com/TheEthicsInstitute)



[The Ethics Institute](https://www.linkedin.com/company/TheEthicsInstitute)



[@EthicsInst](https://twitter.com/EthicsInst)

[www.tei.org.za](http://www.tei.org.za)

building an  
**ethical**  
SOCIETY