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Misplaced trust in high-level employees: Ethical challenges in the public sector

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Since the beginning of time, corruption has been a cancer of society and led to the decline of many great civilizations. “Corruption began life as a moral and corporeal concept and has evolved into a political, legal and economic phenomenon.”^[1] It is a fact that to control corruption, we must understand the causes and symptoms of this pervasive disease, even if we cannot completely eliminate the cancer because there is essentially no “cure.” “Public sector corruption is a symptom of failed governance,” where the norms, traditions, and institutions become entrenched in a culture of unethical conduct and abuse of power.^[2]

As a seasoned public interest attorney and ethics professional, I believe that unethical conduct is on the rise in the public sector. All organizations face common challenges with waste, fraud, abuse, unethical conduct, and corruption. However, state and local corruption schemes are becoming more sophisticated with advanced technology, and citizen distrust and disengagement continue to increase.^[3] Ethics and corruption issues can often be very complex and difficult to navigate. We hear so many stories today in the news that cause us to cringe and shake our heads in disbelief; and the misuse of governmental powers across local and state government is rampant. Corruption becomes prevalent when high-level employees think of themselves before the organization. More importantly, high-level employees hold influential roles of trust in our organizations, and their unethical behavior can negatively affect our organizations and how we do business with the public. The media’s ongoing and sometimes painful portrayal of bad behavior also lends to the public’s diminishing trust in our organizations.

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