From Virtue to Competence

Michael Macaulay and Alan Lawton

Virtue has long been a central principle in the tradition of public service and this paper will explore the extent to which it is still relevant today. Focussing on the role of Monitoring Officer, a key officer in the ethical framework of English local government, our paper asks which virtues, if any, are still needed for public service, or whether these have been displaced as the principles of public life by the managerial notion of technical competence? In addressing these questions our paper will draw an initial distinction between virtue and competence that, upon further investigation, breaks down into a more amorphous concept. We suggest that despite being drawn from two different academic perspectives – those of moral philosophy and management development – the concepts of virtue and competence are actually very similar ideas. Furthermore this theoretical convergence is reflected in the practical concerns of Monitoring Officers and their perspective on public service ethics.

Introduction

Good governance has historically been bound up in ideas of the virtuous ruler, and indeed the virtuous citizen, but the bureaucratisation of modern politics and developments in New Public Management (NPM) have emphasised the importance of managerial efficiency over personal codes of ethics. Intuitively there seems to be a notable distinction between the concepts of virtue and competence. While virtue is bound up in ideas of morality, offering perspectives that shape the way by which we live, competence embodies notions of learned skills and technical efficiency. More fundamentally, virtue is internal (though not innate) even though it has outward consequences: “virtues are character traits which we need to live humanly flourishingly lives”.¹ In contradistinction, competence highlights action rather than character: “built around the fundamental principle of demonstrating capability”.²

This theoretical delineation has been academically reinforced by virtue and competence being located within the distinct academic fields of moral philosophy and management development respectively. Although separate, however, these two areas are by no means mutually exclusive, and one major sphere of confluence is the area of public service management, which seeks to promote managerial efficiency while keeping a constant eye on the public good.

Closer inspection reveals that the two concepts are far more closely interlinked: competences embody certain virtues; whereas virtues require competence in order to be successfully implemented via virtuous actions. Indeed, this convergence is increasingly reflected in modern literature, although it can actually be traced back centuries. We are left, then, with two possible approaches. First, that the two concepts should be kept distinct; and that comparing virtue and competence is akin to comparing apples with

¹ Julian Oakley & Dean Cocking Virtue Ethics and Professional Roles CUP Cambridge 2001 p 18. In their discussion of virtue ethics, Oakley and Cocking concede that other ethical theories also focus on the primacy of character (for example Kantianism and consequentialism) although they distinguish virtue ethics from these theories by a number of other criteria, see pp. 9-19.
oranges. Second, and perhaps more challengingly, we can look to a future in which the two are regarded as more symbiotic, recognising that many managerial competences have innate virtues. This argument has significant implications for those theorists who wish to bring virtue back into the public-management fold – it may well be the case that it has never been more strongly engrained within it. The context of such arguments is that of New Public Management and the claims, and counterclaims, that the public service ethos has been undermined by an increasing concern with the values and practices of private sector organisations.

Nowhere is this more apparent that in the realm of UK local government, in which a new ethical framework, introduced in the Local Government Act 2000\(^3\) has attempted to promote personal standards of behaviour and integrity through a system of codes, regulations and compliance. At issue is the extent to which public officials, both elected and appointed, can be expected to maintain high standards of personal conduct through personal integrity rather than external compliance mechanisms? Key to the implementation of the Ethical Framework is the local authority’s Monitoring Officer, whose remit is to monitor compliance with the rules and regulations and to offer advice to elected politicians on declarations of interest. As an authority’s ‘ethics officer’ a number of questions can be asked of them. To what extent are Monitoring Officers guided by their own personal codes of ethics? Just how virtuous are our public servants? To what extent is ethics perceived as the application of a legalistic code or is it actually concerned with developing moral judgement in individuals?

We were given the chance to explore these questions when, in August 2003, The Standards Board for England commissioned Teesside Business School\(^4\) to conduct research into the extent to which Monitoring Officers feel supported by their relevant local authority and/or integrated within its ethical framework. As part of the research, we attempted to find out what the key Knowledge, Skills and Other Attributes (KSAs) are that allow Monitoring Officers to successfully carry out their roles and responsibilities. The choice proved interesting, as it seemed to fall into the two broad areas of virtue and competence.

This paper, therefore, explores two classic conceptions of virtue developed by political philosophers, introduces the concept of competency as developed by management academics, describes the new ethical framework for local government in the UK, and reports on the initial findings of research on the role of Monitoring Officers.

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3 The term ‘ethical framework’ is not popular with everybody but the expression was repeatedly used by respondents throughout our research. It is also the term that was used by the government in the rubric of the Local Government Act 200 itself. In its guidance notes (n. 102), the Act states: Part III of the Act establishes a new ethical framework for local government. This includes the introduction of statutory codes of conduct, with a requirement for every council to adopt a code covering the behaviour of elected members and of officers, and the creation of a standards committee for each authority. Our paper, therefore, uses ‘ethical framework’ to refer to the key pillars of the Local Government Act 2000: standards committees, register of interests, codes of conduct, and The Standards Board for England.

4 Our research has been conducted in conjunction with colleagues from Warwick University and Liverpool University.
The Historical Virtues of Public Service

Aristotle provided the classic Western exposition of public virtue, inextricably linking the notions of a moral and political life.\(^5\) For Aristotle, virtue is an excellence (arête) that can be divided into two types – intellectual and moral\(^6\) – reflecting the twin elements that make man (in the gender-specific sense) specifically human, i.e. his reason and his ability to make moral judgements through language: “it is a characteristic of man that he alone has any sense of good and evil, of just and unjust”.\(^7\) Virtue is the means by which we become fully human because it allows us to fulfil our particular human end, the eudaimonic good life.\(^8\) Eudaimonia has been translated in various ways over the years either as ‘happiness’, ‘bliss’ or even simply as ‘well being’, and the concept relates to Aristotle’s teleological approach that something can only be understood and fulfilled once it had reached its natural end: the natural end for an acorn, for example, is to become an oak; for man it is to achieve eudaimonia. The good life could thus be recognised, understood and, most importantly, attained. Aristotle’s virtue theory, therefore, necessarily prioritises the good over the right, a distinction that remains crucial to virtue ethics today.\(^9\)

His prioritisation of the good allowed Aristotle to identify a number of concrete moral virtues – courage, temperance, pride, good temper, friendliness, and truthfulness – that, as excellences of human character, enabled man to live the good life. Each of these virtues occupied the middle ground between two extreme positions (echoing Aristotle’s doctrine of the golden mean) and could be cultivated in man by habitually practicing virtuous actions. In this sense moral virtues could be learned. Intellectual virtues – philosophy, science, art, and practical wisdom (phronesis) – relate directly to the soul and could be learned through more formal methods of teaching.

Practical wisdom was of particular importance as it facilitated political thought,\(^10\) and also enabled man to determine the nature of the other virtues. Aristotle states:

> Virtue, then, is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it.\(^11\)

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5 The classic Eastern view can be found in Confucius who, like Aristotle, identified a specific range of virtues – humility, honesty, loyalty, and obedience – that were vital to the successful governance of public life. Confucius believed that such virtues could be cultivated and promoted an elaborate system of rituals, which public servants should follow to help facilitate their moral development. Rojeski suggests that the Confucian tradition has proven particularly influential in US public administration: “in the recent history of public administration leadership we have succeeded in creating Mandarins in the Confucian mould”. See Jim Rojeski The Tao of Public Leadership PA Times July 2000, p5.

6 Aristotle Nicomachean Ethics 1103a 1-10
7 Aristotle The Politics 1253a 16-17
8 There is a debate as to whether eudaimonia is a single concept, or whether it can be applied to a number of distinct human ends (see Everson’s introduction to Aristotle The Politics).
9 See, for example, Julian Oakley & Dean Cocking Virtue Ethics and Professional Roles (Cambridge: CUP, 2001) or Michele Mangini ‘Character and well-being: towards an ethic of character’ Philosophy and Social Criticism vol26, n2, 2000, pp79-98
10 “Political wisdom and practical wisdom are the same state of mind, but their essence is not the same” Aristotle Nicomachean Ethics 1141b 25-30
11 Aristotle Nicomachean Ethics 1107a 1-5
Not only is virtue necessary for good governance, however, but it is also political in a broader sense, as it cannot be either cultivated or practiced outside of the polis. Man can only achieve eudaimonia inside the polis because it is only this particular form of association that facilitates the development of his human self. It is crucial here, also, to remember that Aristotle is referring specifically to male citizens: one of the reasons the polis is so important is because it has the requisite social structure (with subordinate roles for women and, of course, slaves) that allows man to have the time in which to practice virtuous actions: it is the self-sufficiency of the polis that allows moral and intellectual development to take place.\textsuperscript{12} In this sense, all virtues are intimately connected to both public and political life: the polis enables the virtues to be cultivated, which leads to man achieving his natural good of eudaimonia. This is why “he who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must either be a beast or a god: he is no part of a state.”\textsuperscript{13}

This discussion raises an number of important issues for public officials including the extent to which there is a distinction between public and private life; the sense in which public service is a vocation; the relationship between human flourishing and organisational flourishing.\textsuperscript{14}

Machiavelli offers a second conception of virtue, which again is inextricably linked with political life. Unlike Aristotle, however, Machiavelli’s concept has traditionally been seen as the antithesis of a theory of the good: Europe was shocked at Machiavelli’s proposal that the supposedly virtuous leader should so flagrantly disregard traditional moral values and instead lie, cheat, deceive and engage in acts of utmost cruelty. Machiavelli’s notoriety was gained in no small measure because his concept of virtù was equated with the traditional ideas of Christian virtue. This reputation is, of course, grossly unfair. Machiavelli, himself a committed republican bureaucrat, always emphasised the need for any leader to act for the public good. His admiration for the scheming and brutal cruelty of Cesare Borgia (including the murder and public bisecion of his trusted lieutenant, D’Orco\textsuperscript{14}), for example, has always overshadowed his disgust at the very similar actions of Agathocles of Sicily.\textsuperscript{15} This point is perhaps more readily understood when reading The Discourses in addition to The Prince\textsuperscript{16} in which Machiavelli, for example, praises the Roman general Valerius, who got the best out of his troops precisely because he treated them with kindness.

Perhaps more importantly, it reflects a misunderstanding of the word virtù itself. Unlike Aristotle, Machiavelli did not put forward a number of specific virtues that were excellences of human character. Instead, virtù denoted more general skills and excellences pertaining to leadership including such items as: military prowess;

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12} Aristotle \textit{The Politics}, 1326b, 30
\item \textsuperscript{13} Aristotle \textit{The Politics}, 1253a 25-30
\item \textsuperscript{14} see DK Hart (1994) ‘Administration and the Ethics of Virtue: In All Things, Choose First for Good Character and Then for Technical Expertise’ in TL Cooper (ed) \textit{Handbook of Administrative Ethics} (Marcel Dekker, New York)
\item \textsuperscript{15}Machiavelli \textit{Selected Political Writings}, ed and trans by David Wootton (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994) p24.
\item \textsuperscript{16}Machiavelli, (1994) pp.28-29.
\item \textsuperscript{17}Machiavelli (1994) pp 200-204. The over-reliance on Machiavelli’s most (in)famous work continues today, and is particularly prevalent in management literature that seeks to co-opt Machiavelli for advice on business leadership and strategy.
\end{itemize}
diplomatic sensitivity; an understanding of one’s subjects’ character and so on. As Wootton shows, the ruler with the most virtù was, for Machiavelli, not so much virtuous as a virtuoso. Machiavelli’s virtù was therefore not a moral concept in the tradition of Aristotle, although it is still very much connected with right or proper action. Machiavelli’s conflation of virtue and skill arguably fits in more comfortably with notions of managerial (or leadership) competencies, than the more moral character traits of virtue theory. Virtù was easily demonstrable and had clearly understood results whether this was in terms of successful battles, the acquisition of land, or simply good diplomacy. His definition prepares the groundwork for the potential tensions between the concepts of virtue and competence.

The Competency Movement

The notion of competency is one that has been around in the management literature for some time. In the UK a concern with the perceived underperformance of UK managers, partly due to lack of skills and training, in the early 1980s led to a number of initiatives to develop occupational competences. In this context competency may be defined as an underlying characteristic of a person that results in efficient and effective work performance. Thompson argues that work-related competences may be composed of three elements:

- Knowledge in a work-related field
- Skills, defined as a specific ability to perform a particular task
- Aptitude, as the talents that can be brought to a particular task

Competences can be linked to organisational attributes as in the core competency literature to strategy developed by Hamel and Prahalad. Nordhaug identified six categories of competence ranging from the general competences that, for example, are seen in the job adverts for many managerial posts, such as the ability to communicate, negotiation skills and so on, to skills requirements for technical or industry specific work. Our concern in this article is with individuals working within the public sector and performing a specific role.

Boyatzis developed a behavioural approach that identified 21 types of behavioural characteristics which he grouped into five clusters: goal and action management, leadership, human resource management, directing subordinates and focus on others. Whether such characteristics can capture the nature of managerial work is arguable. Watson argues “…managerial competence or effectiveness is indeed a subtle, multifaceted and context-bound thing.” Watson is concerned with how managers make sense of what they are doing. Clearly there is a difference between one manager carrying out a

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task “to promote the public good” and another manager carrying out the same task “to meet my performance targets.”

However, the competency approach offers, in some sense, a truncated and generic view of management that needs to be located within a context, as Watson argues. Thus, a virtues approach may offer a rationale for why one should carry out a particular task or act in a particular way i.e. directed towards eudaimonia; a competency approach focuses on how to act i.e. with skill. Virtue is concerned with developing practical wisdom and judgement, and not merely the exercise of a technical skill. Competency can inform virtue but will not replace it. The pursuit of eudaimonia provides a purpose for the exercise of competency. This is the concern of those who argue that a public service ethos is being undermined by the adoption of competences from private sector organisations. Of course these are simple distinctions.

However, the discussion of the differences between virtue and competency, mirrors the discussion presented by Denhardt who distinguishes between democratic and bureaucratic virtues; democratic in terms of individual rights, liberty and justice and bureaucratic in terms of efficiency, due process and impartiality. For Denhardt, these differences are reconciled by recognising that there is a common moral character to both sets of virtues based upon some notion of fairness, justice, lack of favouritism and so on. The question is to what extent have the, often downplayed, virtues of bureaucracy been undermined by new forms of organisational structures, values and management practices that now prevail within the public services.

The demands made upon officials across the public services have increased in scope and scale in recent years. Unlike the classic model of bureaucracy, officials are no longer located within a particular hierarchy and do not merely carry out duties determined by those above them, particularly policy makers. The extent to which they ever did is, of course, a moot point (see Lipsky for his account of street-level bureaucracy). Public officials engage with a range of different stakeholders both within and outwith their own organisations. Partnership-building, coalition-forming, managing networks are the new imperatives in the drive to provide a seamless public service. At the same time, officials are expected not just to deliver public services economically and efficiently but also to be creative, enterprising and innovative. As public officials come into contact with different sets of values, notably those of private sector organisations, fears are expressed that the public service ethos will be undermined. However, the extent to which there is a generalised public service ethos and the extent of its ethical character are open to question. Notwithstanding that it is argued that traditional public service virtues, identified as integrity and probity, and principles, identified as accountability, are being undermined by more recent principles including entrepreneurialism and risk-taking.

27 Lawton, A, Ethical Management for the Public Services (Open University Press, Buckingham, 1998)
In some ways, such arguments are guilty of category mistakes. There is no reason to
suppose that officials cannot be enterprising and innovative and at the same time serve
some notion of public good. The mistake involves confusing the ‘what’ of public
service delivery with the ‘how’.

However, one development in the changing management of public services that has
implications for the virtues is the increase in the regulatory regimes under which public
services operate. Our public service institutions and our professions are subject to more
and more audit and compliance. However, whatever the views of successive
governments concerning the self-regulation of public sector professionals, it is still the
case that the professions are held in high esteem by the general public. Members of the
professions are deemed to be virtuous by the fact of membership. Yet, the competence
of individual professionals may be challenged and subject to scrutiny.

Recently, some commentators have sought to return virtue to the realm of public
management through the creation of a new public virtue ethics. Cooper, for example,
expands upon MacIntyre’s concept of practice and internal goods to posit a model of
“administrative practice”. Cooper identifies three realms of this practice – public
interest, process and procedures, and loyalty to colleagues – with a list of their attendant
internal goods. He then establishes the relevant virtues that “must be consistent with
agreed upon internal goods of the practice of public administration”. The problem
here is that, as with any theory of the good, there will always be the potential to criticise
particular choices as somewhat arbitrary. For example, Cooper suggests that
“beneficence for citizenry” is one of the internal goods of administrative practice, and
that one of its necessary virtues is benevolence. It could be argued, however, that such
a virtue is entirely unnecessary for an administrator, who has to implement certain
procedures and standards and does not need, therefore, to be personally benevolent.
The problem for Cooper is how any such agreement could be made regarding virtues or
even internal goods.

The Ethical Framework of Local Government

The UK Local Government and Housing Act 1989 (Section 5) gave a statutory
requirement to each local authority to establish the post of Monitoring Officer, whose
principal role was ensure that local policy decisions were legal. The 1989 Act offered a
fairly broad definition of the Monitoring Officer role and as a result the development of
the post was somewhat ad hoc: each authority had a Monitoring Officer that effectively
dealt with things in his/her own way, and many of the actual day-to-day activities of
Monitoring Officers differed between authorities. In addition, and most importantly, the
Monitoring Officer’s role has never been an entirely separate post, but rather an add-on

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21 Many commentators have acknowledged MacIntyre’s use for management. For example, Laurie and Cherry state: “To be sure, Alasdair MacIntyre in After Virtue deals directly with management.” Nigel Laurie and Christopher Cherry Wanted: a Philosophy of Management Reason in Practice vol1 nol 2001 p4. It must be stated, however, MacIntyre criticises modern business practice as being symptomatic of the problem of modernity. See chapter 6 of After Virtue, also Charles M Horvarth, Excellence v effectiveness: MacIntyre’s Critique of business, Business Ethics Quarterly, vol5, n3, pp499-532; or Geoff Moore On the implications of the practice-institution distinction: MacIntyre and the application of modern virtue ethics to business, Business Ethics Quarterly, vol12, n1, pp19-32.

to the duties of a currently serving officer (usually but not always, the chief legal officer within the authority). Consequently the amount of time a Monitoring Officer has been able to dedicate to his/her role has also differed significantly between authorities.

This situation changed dramatically with the introduction of a new “ethical framework” for local government, which was set out in the Local Government Act 2000. The ethical framework was composed of a number of key factors: first, the 2000 Act required all local authorities to establish a Standards Committee if they did not already have one; second, each authority was legally requires to adopt a Code of Conduct, which could include provisions for local circumstances; third, the 2000 Act required each authority to extend the role of the Monitoring Officer, whose job it now is to ensure that the Code of Conduct is implemented and also to set up and maintain Registers of Member’s Interests, as well as maintaining a strong advisory role, especially to Standards Committees.23

In addition, the Local Government Act 2000 created a new national body to oversee the ethical conduct of local authorities, The Standards Board for England, which has powers to investigate complaints of misconduct by members (and co-opted members) of their authority’s Code of Conduct. Investigations are the responsibility of the Ethical Standards Officer, who acts independently of The Standards Board in his/her investigative capacity. An Ethical Standards Officer may, if he/she feels it necessary, refer a matter to an Adjudication Panel, who has the authority to impose sanctions including up to a five-year disqualification from office for members who have breached an authority’s Code of Conduct. The Ethical Standards Officer may also refer an allegation back to an authority’s Standards Committee for a local determination. The Monitoring Officer thus has a potentially extensive liaison role on top of his/her other duties.

Our initial research comprised a series of semi-structured interviews with Monitoring Officers, from which a list of the numerous roles and responsibilities emerged (see table 1 below).

Table 1 – Roles and Responsibilities of the Monitoring Officer

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MO Responsibility</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advising individual members</td>
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<tr>
<td>Advising authority’s Standards Committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>Advising Chief Executive</td>
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<tr>
<td>Advising other chief officers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dealing with Parish Councils (where appropriate)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Advising council</td>
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<tr>
<td>Training members</td>
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<tr>
<td>Advising Leader of the Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maintaining register of Member’s Interests</td>
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<tr>
<td>Investigating allegations and complaints</td>
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<tr>
<td>Commenting on ESOs reports</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reporting to the council under Section 5 of the Local Government and Housing Act</td>
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</table>

Our research has shown that Monitoring Officers consider their advisory roles to be the most important and most time consuming duties to perform.
From Virtue to Competence

From this list it may be seen that the Monitoring Officer role involves a number of activities that traverse both managerial competence and political virtue. As of 2004 these boundaries may become more blurred as new regulations under Section 66 of the Local Government Act 2000 are introduced, which grants (among other things) Monitoring Officers greater investigative powers. The new regulations will not only increase the workload for Monitoring Officers, but they also throw up potentially difficult ethical problems. For example, Monitoring Officers now face an increasing chance of conflicts of interest emerging during investigations in which they may have already proffered advice to a member or officer.

Monitoring Officers therefore have a pivotal role in the ethical framework of local authorities: they promote the ethical conduct of the authority through, for example, their advisory role, whilst enforcing particular standards through registers and codes of conduct. Thus for the Monitoring Officer, the concepts of virtue and competence are of particular relevance.

The question of virtue and competence arose in our research after we asked what Monitoring Officers considered to be the crucial KSAs that enable them to successfully carry out their roles and responsibilities. The initial stages of our research consisted of a number of semi-structured telephone interviews with Monitoring Officers from a range of different local authorities (District Councils, Borough Councils, County Councils, Police Authority, National Parks Authority), from which we compiled the following list of KSAs:

- Ethical awareness
- Investigative skills
- Self-motivation
- Administrative skills
- Personal resilience
- Fearlessness
- Legal expertise
- Interpersonal skills
- Leadership skills
- Problem solving skills
- Training abilities
- Time-management skills
- Political sensitivity
- Local authority experience
- Perseverance
- Verbal communication skills
- Written communication skills

Next, we sent a questionnaire to every Monitoring Officer in England, which included the list of KSAs (above), and asked them to rate the list in terms of: (a) how important each of them is to the successful implementation of the Monitoring Officer’s duties; and, (b) the extent to which each of the KSAs constituted a personal strength or weakness of the Monitoring Officer in question. The results of these two questions can be seen in Table 2 below.

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31Questionnaires were posted to 438 MOs whose names and addresses were supplied by a The Standards Board database. 212 questionnaires were returned, a response rate of 48.5%.

32In both cases a 7-point scale was used. For question (a) the scale ran from 1 - ‘Not at all important’ to 7 - ‘Very important’, whereas question (b) ran from 1 - ‘Very weak’ to 7 - ‘Very strong’
Table 2 – Monitoring Officer KSAs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>KSAs - importance</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>KSAs – personal strengths</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Ethical awareness</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Local authority experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Verbal communication skills</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Ethical awareness</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Interpersonal skills</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Written communication skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Written communication skills</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Political sensitivity</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Political sensitivity</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Legal expertise</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Personal resilience</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Verbal communication skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Problem solving skills</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Self-motivation</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Fearlessness</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Perseverance</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Perseverance</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Interpersonal skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Local authority experience</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Personal resilience</td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Legal expertise</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Problem solving skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Investigative skills</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Leadership skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Self-motivation</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Fearlessness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Leadership skills</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Administrative skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Training abilities</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Investigative skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Time management skills</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Training abilities</td>
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<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Administrative skills</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Time management skills</td>
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In terms of importance, there was some surprise that competences such as legal expertise and local government experience did not warrant a higher placing, especially in light of the backgrounds of most Monitoring Officers: 75% of our respondents confirmed that they had legal qualifications, while 71% had been working at their current local authority for over five years (figures that were reflected in terms of personal strengths). Another interesting feature of both lists is that in each case, 6 out of the top 10 KSAs are virtues rather than competences, even though these are not the same virtues in each list, which may promote an initial reaction that Monitoring Officers therefore place greater value upon the concept of virtue.

Taking our initial view of virtues as character traits that allow us to develop our human selves; and competencies as demonstrable and measurable performance capabilities we can see that the list above can be broadly divided into the following groups:

**Virtue**
- Ethical awareness
- Self-motivation
- Personal resilience
- Fearlessness
- Perseverance
- Political Sensitivity

**Competence**
- Investigative skills
- Administrative skills
- Legal expertise
- Problem solving skills
- Training abilities
- Time management skills
- Local authority experience
- Written communication skills
- Verbal communication skills
- Interpersonal Skills
- Leadership skills

The KSAs in the first list can all be seen to have some virtuous traits associated with them: personal resilience and perseverance, for example, embody such virtues as determination and tenacity; fearlessness requires courage; political sensitivity needs
both intelligence and empathy. The second list offers KSAs that are clearly measurable (such as the qualifications needed for legal expertise) demonstrable (problem solving skills and training skills) and are gained through a process of learning, whether formal (written communication skills) or informal (verbal communication skills, local authority experience).^26

The central problem with this hypothesis is that the meaning of each of the KSAs is contestable and can be individually unpacked to show that there is actually not necessarily any distinction between their categories of virtue and competence. Ethical awareness, for example, was subject to several interpretations during the initial interview stages. One respondent suggested that ethical awareness could not be simply an awareness of right and wrong in the sense of personal morality, because a Monitoring Officer needs to leave personal morals aside when making judgements and giving advice. The respondent stressed that morals were not the same as legal judgement. Another respondent argued that ethical awareness related to transparency, accountability and the rights or wrongs of local authority systems and practices, which ties in with a need for the Monitoring Officer to have an intimate knowledge of the legislative and statutory duties that comprise the ethical framework of local government. Clearly this requires the twin competences of legal expertise and local authority experience.

Political sensitivity, which some respondents saw as inextricably linked to ethical awareness, was also interpreted in at least two distinct ways: first in terms of a wider sense of understanding “how people work”, which from the virtue perspective entails good judgement, empathy, and other character traits; and, second, in terms of specifically party political sensitivity, which again introduces the competence of local authority experience. Similarly, personal resilience was subject to a number of interpretations. Some respondents regarded it as resistance to stress in general, whilst others saw it as the necessity of giving accurate advice, and not softening one’s view particularly when under pressure to change decisions (which had personally occurred to one participant). Again this potentially invokes some of the competence KSAs, such as written and verbal communication skills, in order that a Monitoring Officer may explain a certain judgement.

It is equally apparent that many of the supposed KSA competences can be seen to embody particular virtues. Investigative and problem solving skills require various intellectual virtues; local authority experience itself is inextricably linked to practical wisdom. The boundaries become blurred yet further when we begin to look at motivations: does legal expertise, for example, arise from an initial moral commitment on behalf of the Monitoring officer to study law? It is entirely plausible that people initially choose to accept the post of Monitoring Officer because he/she feels a desire to influence ethical behaviour, and also a confidence that he/she possess the requisite competences with which to carry out the job. Thus even the act of becoming Monitoring Officer reflects a deliberate choice to match certain skills to ethical situations.

^26 It must be stated that this division was not part of our initial research, nor did we ask Monitoring Officers to distinguish which KSAs they regarded as virtues and those that they considered to be competencies.
Virtue and Competence Reconsidered

Our findings reflect the latent ambiguity between notions of both virtue and competence. Recent management literature has stressed that competence is inherent to character, which, as we have seen, is also one of the conceptual underpinnings of virtue. Ellström, for example, argues that a distinction needs to be made between competence and simple qualification that underlines the similarity between competence and virtue. While qualification refers to simple job requirements, competence can be defined in terms of a number of factors: intellectual skills, attitudes, values, motivations, personality traits and social skills. His definition of competence as “the potential capacity of an individual (or a collective) to successfully … handle certain situations or complete a certain task or job” could certainly pass as a definition of virtue, especially with the insertion of the word “moral” in front of situations.

Using Ellström’s competence/qualification distinction as a starting point, Virtanen constructs a series of five public manager competences the last of which is ethical competence. Ethical competence is essential to complement the competition and self-interest that have been introduced by the promotion of the free market in New Public Management (NPM). We argue that ethical competence is essential to provide the underpinning, and not just complement, NPM. For Virtanen, NPM has changed the landscape of welfare states to such an extent that a public manager’s ethical commitments are now orientated towards utility rather than egalitarianism or redistributive justice. Ethical competence is necessary, therefore, to establish the framework for right action in this new form of administration: “without ethical competence, public managers do not use their political, professional or task competence in right ways”.

In the classic expositions stated earlier, virtue can be seen to reflect notions of competence either explicitly (as in Machiavelli) or implicitly (Aristotle). In all cases virtues (which it may be noted have not significantly altered in terms of their nature) can be identified as particular excellences, and as such may be demonstrated and measured. The degree of virtuous behaviour is crucial to theories that prioritise the good over the right. Most crucial of all, however, is that virtue must have a fundamentally practical application: without any public demonstration virtues are effectively meaningless. Thus, like competences, they exist equally in the realm of action as they do in human character. An approach such as Cooper’s, for example, which identifies the relevant virtues associated with administrative practice, can easily be read in terms of management competence. Indeed, the specific virtues that Cooper

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29 Turo Virtanen Changing competencies of public managers: tensions in public commitment The International Journal of Public Sector Management vol13, n4, 2000, pp334. The other categories are: task competence; professional competence (subject area); professional competence (administration); political competence.
identifies is not far removed from the management competences compiled by Vilkinas et al (which lists 55 specific elements), nor from our own list of KSAs.

Conclusion

It may be tempting to think that the advent of NPM has shifted the ethos of public managers entirely toward managerialism, efficiency and competence, and the example of local government potentially reinforces this view. The practice of virtue, of seeking to do well while doing good, which is at the heart of public service management, seems to have been mislaid. Ethical conduct under the new local government framework seems to be promoted through compliance: the enforcement of standards is leading to the bureaucratisation of individual conscience. The expanse of regulations seems to sublimate the need for virtuous conduct. Under the new framework, for example, codes of conduct are increasingly trying to legislate for disrespectful behaviour as well as other rather vague actions, which means that doing good (behaving respectfully towards others) now is simply a matter of doing right (following the regulations). Advances in management development, notably the rise of managerial competences, have reinforced these changes.

Our findings suggest that this argument is both exaggerated and somewhat misguided. Competence has not replaced virtue as a foundation of public service management because virtue is an integral feature of managerial competences. Competence as an excellence of management inevitably has at its heart a notion of virtue. Similarly, in order to be in any sense meaningful (i.e. demonstrable) virtues must have some quality of competence in order for them to be put into practice. In this sense, commentators such as Virtanen, who have shown that there is still room for ethics within public management while accepting the dominance of NPM, do not go far enough. All competence, in one sense, is ethical competence. Virtue and competence are equally valid routes to the successful implementation of a new ethical culture within local government because they ultimately address the same issues: excellences that fit people to certain practices. It is not necessarily the case, then, to reunite virtue to public management, but to recognise that seemingly new approaches have these age-old concerns at their heart. The key is, as Burke, puts it:

...how officials judge the timeliness of the applicability of principles and the particular manner of their application. (p184)\textsuperscript{32}

Our Monitoring Officers offer advice and make decisions in grey areas and where the legislation is not clear. Monitoring Officers interpret the Code of Conduct using their practical wisdom. The kinds of decisions that are made do not lend themselves to merely the technical demonstration of legal competence. Their decisions will be guided by some understanding of the public interest, an understanding that has been developed over time, and which survives the vagaries of political changes. Increasingly, senior managers working for the public services in the UK have to demonstrate the virtuoso requirements of a Machiavelli whilst retaining the virtues of an Aristotle.

\textsuperscript{32} John P. Burke, Reconciling public administration and democracy: the role of the responsible administrator Public Administration Review March/April 1989 p184.