

The Dialectical Relationship Between Service Culture and Moral Development in Public Service

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Abstract. *This article examines the relationship between service culture and the moral development of public servants as a problem of institutional design and personal agency. Its purpose is to explain how external standards of conduct become stable professional practice when they are supported by internalized public-service values. The study uses a qualitative conceptual design combining dialectical analysis, axiological interpretation, and directed content analysis. The analytical corpus comprises the Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan on State Civil Service, the 2025 presidential decree on a professional and results-oriented civil service, international public-integrity frameworks, and selected scholarship on organizational culture, communicative action, and public service motivation. The analysis distinguishes three components of service culture: communicative ethics, procedural responsibility, and integrity-based accountability. It then models their development through contradiction, reflective revision, and institutional–personal synthesis. The principal result is a framework of six operational dimensions linking observable conduct with moral capacities: citizen orientation, respectful communication, reliability, procedural fairness, integrity, and collegial responsibility. The article argues that codes, training, and control mechanisms are necessary but insufficient in isolation. Sustainable service culture requires coherent standards, ethical leadership, reflective learning, fair incentives, and feedback from citizens. The framework is intended for subsequent empirical validation in public institutions.*

Keywords: *public service, service culture, moral development, public integrity, organizational culture, ethical competence, citizen orientation*

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Dövlət xidmətində xidmət mədəniyyəti ilə mənəvi inkişaf arasında dialektik əlaqə

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Xülasə. *Məqalədə dövlət qulluqçularının xidmət mədəniyyəti ilə mənəvi inkişafı arasındakı əlaqə institusional quruluş və şəxsi fəaliyyət problemi kimi araşdırılır. Tədqiqatın məqsədi xarici davranış standartlarının ictimai xidmət dəyərləri daxilən mənimsənilməsi halda necə sabit peşə təcrübəsinə çevrildiyini izah etməkdir. İşdə dialektik təhlil, aksioloji şərh və istiqamətləndirilmiş məzmun təhlilini birləşdirən keyfiyyət yönümlü konseptual dizayndan istifadə edilmişdir. Analitik korpusa Özbəkistan Respublikasının Dövlət qulluğu haqqında Qanunu, peşəkar və nəticəyönümlü dövlət qulluğuna dair 2025-ci il prezident fərmanı, beynəlxalq ictimai dürüstlük çərçivələri, təşkilati mədəniyyət, kommunikativ fəaliyyət və ictimai xidmət motivasiyası üzrə seçilmiş elmi əsərlər daxildir.*

Təhlil xidmət mədəniyyətinin üç tərkib hissəsini fərqləndirir: kommunikativ etika, prosedur məsuliyyəti və dürüstlüyə əsaslanan hesabatlılıq. Daha sonra onların inkişafı ziddiyyət, reflektiv yenidən baxış və institusional–şəxsi sintez mərhələləri vasitəsilə modelləşdirilir. Əsas nəticə müşahidə olunan davranış mədəni qabiliyyətlərlə əlaqələndirən altı əməli ölçüdən ibarət cərgəvidir: vətəndaşpönlümlülük, hörmətli ünsiyyət, etibarlılıq, prosedur ədaləti, dürüstlük və kollektiv məsuliyyət. Məqalə göstərir ki, davranış kodeksləri, təlim və nəzarət mexanizmləri zəruri olsa da, ayrılıqda kifayət etmir. Davamlı xidmət mədəniyyəti uyğun standartlar, etik liderlik, reflektiv öyrənmə, ədalətli təşviqlər və vətəndaş rəyi tələb edir.

Açar sözlər: *dövlət qulluğu, xidmət mədəniyyəti, mədəni inkişaf, ictimai dürüstlük, təşkilati mədəniyyət, etik səriştə, vətəndaşpönlümlülük*

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Introduction

Public service culture is expressed in the everyday ways in which officials interpret rules, communicate with citizens, exercise discretion, and accept responsibility for their decisions. It therefore cannot be reduced to etiquette or procedural discipline. Formal rules establish legitimate expectations, yet the quality of implementation depends on whether officials understand and internalize the values that those rules are designed to protect. The OECD defines public integrity through consistent alignment with shared ethical values and the prioritization of the public interest over private interests, thereby connecting institutional arrangements with individual conduct (Recommendation of the Council on Public Integrity, 2017, OECD, 2020).

This connection is especially important in citizen-facing services. Timeliness, accuracy, equal treatment, clear explanations, and respectful communication are simultaneously administrative and ethical requirements. A formally correct decision may still weaken trust if it is delivered without intelligible reasons or with indifference to the citizen's situation. Conversely, goodwill alone cannot substitute for legality, competence, or equal procedures. Service culture thus arises from the interaction between personal dispositions and an organizational environment that authorizes, supports, and evaluates ethical conduct.

The problem can be formulated as a contradiction between external norm and internal commitment. A rule may require an official to act impartially, but stable impartial conduct also requires the capacity to recognize conflicts of interest, resist improper influence, and justify a decision in public-interest terms. Dialectical analysis treats such tension as a source of development rather than as a choice between control and conscience. The relevant question is how organizational controls and personal moral agency can be transformed into a mutually reinforcing system.

This approach is consistent with the theory of organizational culture, in which visible practices, declared values, and underlying assumptions interact over time (Schein & Schein, 2017). It also reflects the idea of communicative rationality: legitimacy depends not only on the outcome of an administrative act but also on reasons that can be understood and assessed by those affected (Habermas, 1984). In public administration, public service motivation further explains why commitment to the public interest can shape occupational choice and behavior, while later research emphasizes that motivation is sensitive to institutional context and managerial practice (Perry & Wise,

1990; Ritz et al., 2016). Uzbekistan's Law on State Civil Service establishes principles that include legality, professionalism, accountability, openness, impartiality, and service to the people. The reform agenda reinforced in 2025 places additional emphasis on professionalization and results-oriented personnel management (Law on State Civil Service No. ZRU-788, 2022; Decree on Organizing State Civil Service No. PF-95, 2025). These norms make the relationship between service standards and moral qualities a practical governance issue. Xoliyarova (2026) similarly argues that improving service standards should support the moral profile of civil servants rather than remain a formal compliance exercise.

The purpose of this article is to develop a conceptually rigorous framework for explaining and assessing the relationship between service culture and moral development in public service. It addresses three questions. First, which components of service culture have a direct moral dimension? Second, through what mechanism can external standards become internalized professional conduct? Third, which observable indicators can be used in future empirical assessment without claiming that moral character is reducible to a numerical score?

Methods

The study follows a qualitative conceptual design. Its evidence base combines normative documents, international integrity frameworks, and selected theoretical literature. The normative component includes the Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan on State Civil Service and the presidential decree of 19 June 2025 on organizing civil service through new approaches (Decree No. PF-95, 2025). The international policy component comprises the OECD Recommendation on Public Integrity (2017), the OECD Public Integrity Handbook (OECD, 2020), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report on public service motivation (UNDP, 2015), and the UNDP Integrity and Ethics Agency Improvement Framework (UNDP, 2023). The theoretical component draws on dialectics, communicative action, organizational culture, and public service motivation (Habermas, 1984; Hegel, 1977; Perry & Wise, 1990; Ritz et al., 2016; Schein & Schein, 2017).

Directed content analysis was used to identify passages concerning public interest, integrity, impartiality, responsibility, professionalism, communication, learning, accountability, and citizen orientation. These concepts were grouped into three analytical domains: relationships with citizens, performance of official procedures, and responsibility for the ethical use of public authority. The grouping was interpretive rather than statistical; no frequency counts are presented because the documents differ in purpose, length, and genre.

Dialectical analysis was applied in three steps. The first step identified recurrent tensions: rule and discretion, efficiency and explanation, individual conviction and organizational incentive, and control and trust. The second step examined how one-sided responses can reproduce the problem. Excessive formalism may produce mechanical compliance, whereas an exclusively character-based approach may leave conduct dependent on personal preference. The third step constructed a synthesis in which institutional standards shape behavior while reflective practice allows officials and organizations to learn from difficult cases.

Axiological analysis clarified the values embedded in each domain. Respect and dignity were connected with communication; conscientiousness and reliability with procedural performance; and honesty, fairness, and responsibility with accountability. These values were then translated into observable but non-exhaustive indicators. An indicator is treated as evidence about conduct, not as a complete measure of moral worth. This distinction avoids the methodological error of equating ethical development with a single performance score.

The study is conceptual and does not involve human participants, interviews, personal data, or experiments. Its validity therefore depends on transparent source selection, logical coherence, and the practical interpretability of the proposed framework. Empirical testing is reserved for future research.

Results

The first result is a three-component model of service culture. The communicative-ethical component covers respectful treatment, understandable explanation, listening, and responsiveness. Its moral foundation is recognition of the citizen as a person entitled to dignity and reasons. The procedural-responsibility component covers accuracy, timeliness, consistent application of rules, and correction of errors. Its moral foundation is conscientious performance of entrusted duties. The integrity-accountability component covers impartiality, conflict-of-interest management, transparency, and willingness to accept review. Its moral foundation is priority of the public interest.

The model shows that the components are analytically distinct but practically interdependent. Respectful communication without procedural reliability creates courtesy without effective service. Procedural efficiency without fairness can normalize unequal treatment. Integrity controls without an open communication climate can discourage questions and reporting. A mature service culture requires the components to operate as one system, a conclusion consistent with whole-of-government approaches to public integrity (OECD, 2020) and agency-level integrity improvement (UNDP, 2023).

The second result is a developmental mechanism organized as contradiction, reflective revision, and synthesis. Contradiction appears when declared standards conflict with routine practices or incentives. An institution may formally prioritize citizens while rewarding only processing volume; an official may value fairness while facing informal pressure to give preferential treatment. These situations reveal the gap between normative language and operating assumptions.

Reflective revision begins when the contradiction is made discussable through case review, supervision, complaint analysis, peer learning, or protected reporting. This stage is not simple rejection of existing rules. It distinguishes legitimate procedural safeguards from habits that no longer serve their purpose. In Hegelian terms, development preserves what is rational in the earlier form while overcoming its limitation (Hegel, 1977). In organizational terms, it requires examination of the assumptions that reproduce behavior (Schein & Schein, 2017).

Synthesis occurs when ethical judgment and institutional support become mutually reinforcing. Officials receive clear standards, practical guidance, and fair review; leaders model expected conduct; training uses real dilemmas; and incentives do not penalize careful explanation or lawful refusal. Personal commitment then becomes visible in repeatable professional practices, while institutional feedback helps refine those practices. The outcome is described here as value-based service competence.

The third result is an operational framework of six dimensions. The framework links values with observable behaviors and appropriate forms of institutional evidence. It is deliberately plural: no single indicator can establish the existence or absence of integrity. Multiple sources should be combined, and any assessment should allow contextual explanation and procedural appeal.

Table 1
Operational framework for value-based service competence

Dimension	Moral capacity	Observable conduct	Possible evidence
Citizen orientation	Public-interest commitment	Explains options and considers lawful citizen needs	Case review and citizen feedback
Respectful communication	Respect for dignity	Listens, uses clear language, avoids dismissive treatment	Observation and substantiated feedback
Reliability	Conscientiousness	Provides accurate information and corrects errors	Quality review and rework records
Procedural fairness	Justice	Applies comparable rules consistently and gives reasons	Decision sampling and appeal outcomes
Integrity	Honesty and self-restraint	Discloses conflicts and refuses improper influence	Declarations, advice records, audit findings
Collegial responsibility	Shared accountability	Raises risks, supports learning, and accepts review	Team review and improvement actions

The fourth result concerns implementation. Values become durable when they are embedded across the employment cycle rather than confined to a code or an occasional seminar. Recruitment can use scenario-based questions about impartiality and public interest. Induction can connect legal duties to realistic service dilemmas. Supervision can focus on reasons, not only outputs. Performance review can combine service quality, lawful results, and ethical process. Leadership and protected reporting mechanisms can ensure that integrity is supported when it is costly.

This implementation logic also clarifies the role of motivation. Public service motivation can orient employees toward the public interest, but motivation is not self-executing and should not be romanticized. Organizational conditions may sustain, redirect, or frustrate it (Perry & Wise, 1990; Ritz et al., 2016; UNDP, 2015). For that reason, the proposed framework integrates personal motivation with standards, resources, leadership, and accountability.

Discussion

The results support a relational understanding of service culture. Institutions do not merely constrain officials from outside; they shape the language, incentives, and routines through which officials interpret their roles. At the same time, institutions act through people who can apply, question, or circumvent rules. Sustainable improvement therefore requires both organizational design and personal moral agency.

The framework differs from a narrow compliance model in two respects. First, it treats minimum legal compliance as a necessary floor, not the full meaning of ethical service. The OECD Recommendation explicitly encourages standards that go beyond minimum requirements and prioritize the public interest (Recommendation of the Council on Public Integrity, 2017). Second, it

treats communication as part of legitimacy. Citizens need decisions that are not only lawful but also intelligible, respectful, and open to appropriate review. Habermas's account of communicative action helps explain why the quality of reasons matters in institutional relationships (Habermas, 1984).

The framework also differs from approaches that rely primarily on moral exhortation. Appeals to conscience can become symbolic if employees work under contradictory incentives, ambiguous responsibility, or leadership that tolerates exceptions. UNDP's agency improvement framework emphasizes diagnosis, planning, management, and measurement at the organizational level, while the OECD handbook stresses coherent responsibilities, standards, risk management, capacity, openness, and enforcement (OECD, 2020; UNDP, 2023). Moral development is therefore interpreted here as ethically informed professional competence supported by institutional conditions, not as a private or confessional category.

For Uzbekistan, this interpretation offers a way to connect legal principles with personnel practice. The State Civil Service Law and the 2025 reform decree provide a normative basis for professionalism, accountability, public orientation, and results (Law No. ZRU-788, 2022; Decree No. PF-95, 2025). The proposed six dimensions can help translate these principles into training cases, supervisory conversations, and balanced evaluation criteria. They should not, however, be converted mechanically into rankings. Ethical judgment is contextual, and poorly designed metrics can produce strategic compliance rather than genuine learning.

A practical assessment should therefore use triangulation. Administrative records can show delays or rework; citizen feedback can identify communication problems; reasoned case review can examine fairness; and integrity systems can document advice, disclosure, and response to risk. Each source has limitations, but together they can support a more credible judgment than a single satisfaction score or output count. The official should also have access to the evidence and an opportunity to explain contested cases.

The proposed model is compatible with Xoliyarova's earlier conclusion that service-culture standards contribute to the moral profile of civil servants (Xoliyarova, 2026), but it sharpens that argument by separating values, conduct, and institutional evidence. This separation is important because a value cannot be inferred directly from one outcome, and an outcome may have multiple causes. The framework is thus a guide for inquiry and organizational learning rather than a claim to measure inner character directly.

Limitations

The study is conceptual and document-based. It does not test causal relationships, estimate effect sizes, or claim that the proposed dimensions predict citizen trust. The selected policy and theoretical sources were chosen for relevance rather than through a systematic-review protocol. Translation between legal, philosophical, and organizational concepts may also obscure differences in disciplinary meaning.

The framework must therefore be validated before it is used for consequential personnel decisions. Sector, organizational level, workload, discretion, and the type of citizen interaction may change the meaning and feasibility of individual indicators. In addition, citizen feedback can reflect expectations or bias and should never be treated as a self-sufficient measure of ethical conduct.

Future Research

Future studies should develop interview and survey items for the six dimensions, pilot them in several public institutions, and test their reliability and construct validity. Mixed-method research could combine document analysis, anonymized service records, case vignettes, employee interviews, and

citizen feedback. Longitudinal designs would be especially useful for examining whether reflective supervision, leadership behavior, and scenario-based ethics training produce durable change.

Comparative research should also examine how the model operates in organizations with different mandates and levels of discretion. Such studies can determine which dimensions are general and which require sector-specific adaptation, while protecting employee rights and personal data.

Conclusion

Service culture and moral development in public service are best understood as mutually constitutive. Rules, procedures, and controls provide a legitimate structure for conduct, while internalized values give those structures consistency in situations that require judgment. Neither dimension is sufficient alone. The article developed a three-component model of communicative ethics, procedural responsibility, and integrity-based accountability; explained development through contradiction, reflective revision, and synthesis; and proposed six operational dimensions for future assessment. The model's central practical implication is that public institutions should align standards, leadership, training, incentives, review, and citizen feedback. This alignment can move service culture from episodic compliance toward value-based professional competence while preserving legality, fairness, and public accountability.

Declarations

Ethics approval: Not applicable. The study used publicly available documents and did not involve human participants or personal data.

Conflict of interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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