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# Ethical Leaders Interview



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## Ethical Leaders Interview

### **Introduction:**

Public or non-profit organizations must have ethical leaders at the helm, especially in an era marked by the pervasive presence of ethical dilemmas across both sectors. Throughout my professional journey, I've had the privilege of collaborating with individuals who embody the core principles that form the foundation of ethical behavior and provide a framework for individuals and organizations to navigate ethical dilemmas and make morally informed decisions in various contexts. For my ethical leader's interview, I chose two administrators who have wielded significant influence in both the public and non-profit sectors. Both individuals have held leadership positions for over three decades and have demonstrated a consistent record of success in accomplishing their personal and organizational objectives. Both Robert "Bob" Guarasci, the Founder and CEO of New Jersey Developmental Corporation (NJCDC), and Eleizer "Eli" Burgos, former Business Administrator of the City of Paterson, exemplify the core principles of integrity, accountability, transparency, compassion, beneficence, respect for others, fairness and justice. Please allow me to formally introduce Bob Guarasci, who in 1994 partnered with Robert Long to form a community development organization in Paterson, New Jersey. Initially, they secured a federal grant to run an AmeriCorps national service program initiated by then-President Bill Clinton, but notably over the past 30 years, the organization has grown significantly and now provides services to over 4,000 children and families daily. Their services include school-based Teen Centers, a youth center, a preschool, after-school programs, a charter school, and various other initiatives. Additionally, they've developed over 200 units of affordable housing, constructed community spaces, and playgrounds, and recently launched a city-wide Financial Empowerment Center in partnership with the City of Paterson. They've also focused on rehabilitating century-old buildings, emphasizing the importance of historic preservation in their work. Before serving as the administrator for NJCDC, Bob also served in a leadership post in government at the NJ Department of Human Services and currently serves on various public and non-profit boards.

My second interviewee, Eli Burgos, is currently Deputy Mayor for the City of Paterson and also serves on private and non-profit boards. Most notably, he is known as the longest-serving Business Administrator of the City of Paterson for his 97 months dedicated to that role. Before serving as the BA, Eli was the Purchasing Agent and Deputy Director of Human Resources for the City of Paterson, where he dedicated five decades of his life, starting just a couple of years after his honorable discharge from the U.S. Army in 1971. I chose Mr. Guarasci and Mr. Burgos because of their long-standing and exemplary record serving as administrators in both public and non-profit organizations. As I delved deeper into their experiences with ethical dilemmas, it became increasingly evident to me that they recognized the significance of effectively managing such challenges within organizations. They understand that navigating ethical dilemmas is crucial not only for maintaining trust, reputation, and legal compliance but also for fostering a positive organizational culture and upholding core values.

**High Point Ethical Experiences:**

As Bob Guarasci explained “approximately a year ago, a marijuana dispensary, approved to operate in our municipality, expressed interest in donating its opening day proceeds to a non-profit organization. “Recognizing our organization's strong community ties and reputable management, they believed we could effectively utilize the proceeds for our programs or projects.” He continued to say that “while appreciative of their consideration, I carefully deliberated on the matter and involved my leadership team in the decision-making process.” Ultimately, Mr. Guarasci and his team chose to decline the donation. Their decision stemmed from concerns about the potential message accepting proceeds from marijuana sales might convey to our youth and community. As an organization committed to promoting values and awareness about the risks associated with substance use, particularly marijuana, accepting such funds could send conflicting messages. Despite the legalization of marijuana in New Jersey, “I prioritized maintaining the integrity of our organization and adhering to the ethical standards I've set as founder and CEO,” stated Mr. Guarasci.

He believed that upholding the organization's moral compass was paramount, even in the face of potential financial support. Moreover, his team agreed that ethical conduct is essential for cultivating trust among stakeholders, including clients, donors, and the public, thereby enhancing the organization's credibility and support base. In the non-profit sector, ethical decision-making ensures alignment with the mission and values of the organization. Mr. Guarasci affirms that as a leader, it is imperative to lead by example and prioritize the community's best interests over external pressures or interests that may not align with our vision.”

During his tenure as Purchasing Agent, Eli Burgos explains that he encountered a challenging situation with a long-serving employee who demonstrated exceptional work ethics and skills. When the chief clerk passed away, Burgos promoted this employee to the vacant position. Despite her dedication and deserving of a raise, bureaucratic hurdles prevented Burgos from securing a salary increase within their division. His efforts to advocate for her repeatedly met obstacles due to labor union regulations. After several meetings with the Personnel Director and labor union representative, Burgos even suggested she transfer to another city division where a raise was possible, but she hesitated due to concerns about losing her title protection under NJ Civil Service Rules. Over time, their professional relationship strained, with the employee increasingly doubting Burgos's advocacy on her behalf. Misunderstandings further escalated, with the employee perceiving offense where none was intended and exhibiting resistance to tasks assigned by Burgos. The situation culminated in her request to address the city council, accusing Burgos of neglecting her raise request. He attended the public city council meeting, inviting her union representatives to corroborate that despite his efforts, the city would not authorize a raise because they would have to renegotiate the labor union contract which would implicate other city employee salaries. Unfortunately, legal constraints prevented him from fully vindicating himself. Eventually, the employee transferred to a different city division, where she continued to encounter difficulties. It was only after apologizing to Burgos and disclosing her recent bipolar diagnosis that clarity emerged. Burgos, empathetic but relieved, reflected on the challenging ordeal, realizing the toll it had taken on both parties and expressing compassion for the employees' struggles.

Upon reconnecting, Mr. Burgos expressed his empathy to the employee, stating, "I felt deeply sorry for your situation, and if you had chosen to remain in my department, it wouldn't have bothered me. I simply wish I could have been able to do more." Mr. Burgos said that throughout the years, he remained focused on finding the best solution for the employee while she was working in his department, striving to boost her morale and motivation to perform her job efficiently and with optimism.

**Themes:**

CEO Guarasci's decision to decline a donation from the marijuana dispensary reflects a commitment to ethical principles that are vital for organizational integrity and alignment with values. By prioritizing **integrity**, he ensures that the organization maintains consistency in ethical standards, even when faced with financial incentives. **Transparency** is evident through the involvement of the leadership team in the decision-making process, fostering openness and collective accountability. Demonstrating **accountability**, the CEO considers the potential implications of accepting the donation on the organization's values and mission, ensuring alignment with organizational goals. **Respect for stakeholders**, particularly the community and youth, is upheld by prioritizing their well-being and sending a clear message about the organization's stance on substance use. Despite potential financial benefits, the decision aligns with the principles of **beneficence** by prioritizing the long-term welfare of the community and promoting values that contribute to overall health and well-being. By declining the donation, the leader mitigates the risk of harm or conflict by avoiding mixed messages about substance use and maintains the organization's integrity. Overall, CEO Guarasci's decision exemplifies leadership by example, reinforcing the importance of ethical conduct and integrity within the organization's decision-making processes. These ethical principles guided the leader's decision-making process and underscored the importance of upholding ethical standards in organizational decision-making.

Several ethical principles guide Burgos's actions and decisions. His unwavering **integrity** is evident in his consistent advocacy for the employee's well-being and recognition, despite bureaucratic hurdles. Burgos's

commitment to **justice** is demonstrated through his efforts to secure a deserved salary increase, ensuring fair treatment and acknowledgment of the employees' contributions. Additionally, his empathy and support for the employee underscore **respect** for her as an individual, maintaining dignity even in strained professional relationships. **Transparency** remains paramount as Burgos addresses the city council and invites union representatives, fostering clarity and accountability in decision-making processes. His focus on finding the best solution and boosting morale exemplifies **beneficence**, promoting the employee's well-being and success within the organization. Moreover, Burgos's actions aim to prevent harm or conflict, showcasing a commitment to nonmaleficence. Finally, his **empathy and compassion**, particularly upon learning of the employee's bipolar diagnosis, highlight a compassionate approach to leadership. Overall, these ethical principles ensure fairness, respect, transparency, and empathy in Burgos's interactions with the employees and stakeholders involved.

#### **Common Themes:**

Both Mr. Burgos and Mr. Guarasci demonstrate **integrity**, defined as “adherence to a code of conduct, honesty, sincerity; candor (Johnson, n.d.). They upheld their ethical values and principles, even when faced with difficult circumstances. Burgos consistently advocated for the well-being of his employee, despite bureaucratic obstacles, while Guarasci prioritized the organization's values over financial gain by declining the donation from the marijuana dispensary. In both scenarios, there is a clear **respect for stakeholders** involved. In *Meeting the Ethical Challenges of Leadership*, Craig E. Johnson emphasized that respect is the “treatment of employees with esteem value; demonstration of consideration and concern” (Johnson, n.d.). Burgos shows empathy and support for his employee, recognizing her rights and concerns within the organization. Similarly, Guarasci considers the potential impact on the community and youth when deciding to decline the donation, demonstrating respect for their well-being and values. **Transparency** is evident in both situations, as both Burgos and Guarasci involve others in the decision-making process and communicate openly about their reasoning. Burgos engages with the city council and union representatives, ensuring

clarity and accountability. Similarly, Guarasci deliberates with his leadership team before making a decision, fostering openness and inclusivity. “Transparency is the key to exercising personal freedom and establishing healthy relationships between individuals, between people and organizations, and between organizations” (Johnson, n.d.). Additionally, Guarasci's decision reflects his accountability to stakeholders and supporters. He wants to ensure that their trust in the organization remains intact.

Burgos and Guarasci's moral compasses serve as guiding principles that influence their decisions and actions in their respective scenarios. For Burgos, his moral compass drives him to prioritize the well-being and rights of his employee, even in the face of bureaucratic obstacles and strained professional relationships. Despite challenges, he remains committed to advocating for fairness and justice, demonstrating empathy and compassion for his employee's struggles. Similarly, Guarasci's moral compass guides him to prioritize the values and integrity of the organization when faced with the decision to accept or decline a donation from a marijuana dispensary. He considers the potential impact on stakeholders and the community, ensuring that the organization's principles remain aligned with its mission and values. In both cases, Burgos and Guarasci's moral compasses serve as moral anchors, guiding them to make decisions that uphold ethical standards, integrity, and the best interests of those they serve. They demonstrate a commitment to ethical leadership and decision-making, ensuring that their actions reflect their values and principles.

### **Relationship of Themes to Academic Readings:**

“Ethics may be understood as the study of moral conduct and moral status. Ethics and morality are often used interchangeably” (Cooper, n.d.). In *The Responsible Administrator*, Cooper also goes on to say that “morality assumes some accepted modes of behavior that are given by religious tradition, a culture, a social class, a community, or a family” (Cooper, n.d.). Ethics, on the other hand, Cooper defines as the “examination and analysis of the logic, values, beliefs, and principles that are used to justify morality in its various forms” (Cooper, n.d.). Both CEO Guarasci and BA Burgos’ actions set the tone for how employees should conduct themselves and make choices. Ethics and morality, as defined by Cooper, describe these

two exceptional leaders who have not only set a high standard for ethical conduct but have also demonstrated a transformative approach to their work. They navigate complex challenges with a steadfast moral compass, consistently making decisions that prioritize the well-being of others and the greater good. Johnson agrees that “transparency begins with openness,” (Johnson, n.d.) and that when in high-risk situations, followers want consistent leaders who have integrity and are transparent (Johnson, n.d.). Both Guarasci and Burgos also exemplified respect, which according to Johnson’s teachings, refers to the treatment of employees with esteem and value’ (Johnson, n.d.).

### **The Compleat Ethical Leader in Public Administration:**

The compleat ethical leader in public administration embodies a combination of traits and qualities gleaned from academic literature and real-world insights obtained from interviews with individuals like Burgos and Guarasci. Drawing from Craig E. Johnson "Meeting the Ethical Challenges of Leadership" and Terry L. Cooper "The Responsible Administrator," the ideal leader exhibits integrity, transparency, accountability, empathy, and a commitment to serving the greater good. Integrity forms the cornerstone of ethical leadership, as exemplified by Burgos and Guarasci's unwavering dedication to upholding principles and values even in the face of adversity. Transparency ensures open communication and fosters trust among stakeholders, a trait evident in Burgos's engagement with the city council and Guarasci's inclusive decision-making process. Accountability is central to ethical leadership, with leaders like Burgos and Guarasci taking responsibility for their actions and decisions. Their empathy and compassion towards their employees and stakeholders highlight the importance of understanding and addressing the needs and concerns of others. Furthermore, a commitment to serving the greater good is essential for ethical leaders in public administration. Burgos and Guarasci's decisions prioritize the well-being of their employees and communities, reflecting a genuine desire to make a positive impact. Reflecting on these insights, my moral compass would be influenced to prioritize integrity, transparency, accountability, empathy, and a commitment to serving the greater good in my leadership approach. Learning from the experiences of Burgos and Guarasci reinforces the importance of

ethical leadership principles in navigating complex challenges and promoting positive outcomes in public administration. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) also plays a significant role in both Burgos and Guarasci's styles of leadership by focusing on strengths, positive aspects, and solutions rather than dwelling on problems or shortcomings. In Burgos's scenario with the employee, despite facing challenges and misunderstandings, he remains focused on finding the best solution and boosting morale, reflecting an appreciative approach to leadership. Similarly, Guarasci's decision to decline a donation from the marijuana dispensary is guided by a focus on the organization's values and the positive impact on the community, rather than solely on financial considerations. From their leadership styles, I have learned the importance of adopting an AI approach in my leadership style. Instead of solely focusing on problems or weaknesses, strive to identify and leverage strengths, opportunities, and positive aspects within my team or organization. Encourage open dialogue, collaboration, and creativity to explore innovative solutions and approaches to challenges. By adopting an AI approach, I can foster a culture of positivity, growth, and continuous improvement within my team, ultimately leading to enhanced morale, engagement, and success. "AI puts all the emphasis and value on the search for new, shared understandings of what has already caused the system to be at its best," (Fry, 2020).

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