

Ethical Principles and Standards of Professional Conduct in Public Administration: A Case Study in Serbia

Abstract: *This paper aims to review the results on awareness and the presence of ethical principles in public administration. The findings serve as indicators of the behaviour of public officials. The results help determine whether ethical norms are adequately represented in formal terms. The study also examined claims regarding whether the functioning of operations within public administration is possible if there is no consistent application of ethics and no effective institutional oversight. The conclusion reached is that strengthening the ethical culture in public administration - through education and the accountability of public officials - represents a key prerequisite for building high-quality professional relationships. More specifically, this contributes to improving the quality of public services and increasing employee satisfaction. Conducting operations without an ethical foundation is not advisable in public administration, as it affects the overall quality of work relationships and employee satisfaction. A proposed direction for further analysis would be examining the impact on employees' work attitudes when ethical principles are not applied.*

Keywords: *public administration, ethics, standards of professional conduct, case study, Serbia*

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INTRODUCTION

Ethical principles and standards of professional conduct play an important role in improving the quality, transparency, and accountability of public administration. Ethical behavior in public institutions contributes not only to effective organizational performance, but also to employee satisfaction, public trust, and the quality of public services (Bogdanović, 2023). For this reason, research on employees' perceptions of ethical behavior and professional standards in public administration has become increasingly important. Research conducted in public institutions should ensure anonymity and voluntary participation in order to protect employees and encourage honest responses. Anonymous surveys reduce fear of criticism from management and enable employees to express their opinions about workplace conditions, interpersonal relations, and ethical challenges more freely (Sever Mališ et al., 2012). Such an approach is consistent with both domestic and international ethical research standards.

Ethics represents a system of moral values and principles that guide human behavior, while professional ethics refers to standards and rules of conduct within the workplace. In public administration, ethical principles are regulated through laws, codes of conduct, and institutional procedures that define the responsibilities of public servants and ensure professionalism, integrity, and accountability (Vasiljević, 2016). Previous studies have shown that factors such as leadership, employee education, career development, and organizational culture significantly influence the development of ethical behavior in public institutions (Vukotić et al., 2019).

At the same time, public administration employees are often exposed to ethical challenges, including workplace pressure, discrimination, mobbing, and inconsistent application of professional standards (Fatić, 2014). Ethical principles should therefore not remain only formal rules, but should guide everyday professional conduct and decision-making processes (Škandro & Trifković, 2021). Recent research in Serbia indicates that employees are generally familiar with ethical principles, although unethical behavior and insufficient institutional supervision are still present in practice (Šarkiće, 2025).

The aim of this paper is to examine the role of ethical principles and standards of professional conduct in public administration, as well as the challenges related to their practical implementation. The study combines theoretical analysis with empirical research conducted through an anonymous survey among employees in a public sector institution in Belgrade, Serbia. A total of 100 employees participated in the survey process, while 78 completed questionnaires were included in the analysis.

The paper is organized into three sections. The first section presents the theoretical framework and literature review related to ethics and professional conduct in public administration. The second section explains the methodology and demographic structure of the sample, together with the results related to employees' knowledge and application of ethical principles. The third section presents and discusses the findings of the case study. Finally, the conclusion highlights the importance of strengthening ethical awareness, institutional supervision, and organisational responsibility in order to improve the quality of public administration and employee satisfaction.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The field of public administration provides a broad basis for analyzing organizational behavior, professional standards, and ethical principles in public institutions. Public administration includes state bodies and institutions responsible for managing public affairs in the interest of the state and its citizens (Marčetić, 2006). Its functioning is based on the protection of the public interest, equal treatment of citizens, and accountability in decision-making processes (Rawls, 1971).

Public administration operates within a hierarchical organizational structure characterized by formal authority, institutional supervision, and clearly defined responsibilities, which corresponds to Weber's bureaucratic model of organization (Weber, 1978). However, deviations from established legal and ethical principles may negatively affect institutional performance and public trust (Bulatović & Korac, 2014).

Theoretical discussions on ethics have long emphasized the importance of moral behavior and professional responsibility. Aristotle viewed ethics as a practical philosophy focused on the development of virtue and moral character (Babić-Avdispahić, 1995). In contrast, deontological ethics, particularly Kant's approach, emphasizes duty, legality, and adherence to rules as the foundation of ethical behavior (Kant, 1993). These philosophical perspectives remain relevant in contemporary public administration, where ethical conduct is closely connected with professionalism, responsibility, and service to the public interest.

Within public administration, managers and human resource departments play an important role in promoting ethical standards, employee education, and organizational satisfaction (Krčalo & Džafić, 2018). Institutional behavior is regulated through formal and informal norms that shape professional relations and everyday administrative practice (Krčalo & Zolota, 2013). Ethical codes in public administration are generally based on principles such as legality, independence, objectivity, integrity, responsibility, and respect for diversity and professional conduct.

Recent studies have increasingly focused on the relationship between ethics and organizational performance. Research shows that ethical behavior contributes to trust, cooperation, and organizational stability among employees (Ferasso et al., 2025). Ethical standards improve institutional functioning and support effective communication, professional integrity, and responsible decision-making processes (Mihajlović & Stojanović, 2010). However, formal ethical rules alone are not sufficient to ensure ethical behaviour in practice.

The effective implementation of ethical standards depends largely on organizational culture, leadership, continuous employee education, and institutional support (Latta & Clotney, 2020). Organizations that actively promote transparency, responsibility, and ethical awareness are more likely to create a work environment in which ethical behavior becomes part of everyday professional practice (Lešić, 2025; Kudra, 2025). In this context, ethics should not be understood only as a formal legal obligation, but also as a practical framework guiding professional conduct and decision-making.

Modern public administration faces additional ethical challenges related to bureaucratization, administrative pressure, and digital transformation. Excessive administrative control may create institutional burdens without significantly improving the quality of public services (Marčetić, 2013). At the same time, the development of digital administration requires new ethical standards related to transparency, accountability, and equal access to public services (Anshar & Ifing, 2025).

Employees in public administration are expected to respect equality, avoid discrimination, and act in accordance with legal and institutional regulations that protect citizens' rights and the public interest (Rawls, 1971). Compliance with these standards preserves institutional integrity and contributes to public trust in administration (Weber, 1978). Ethical behavior in public administration therefore represents a connection between philosophical principles and practical institutional action (Kikovski, 2025).

Contemporary management approaches emphasize the importance of balancing formal regulations with the development of ethical organizational culture and professional autonomy among employees (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015). Employees who are familiar with organizational procedures, workplace responsibilities, and legal regulations are more likely to contribute to efficient, transparent, and responsible institutional functioning (Masnica, 2019).

Case study research in public administration provides valuable insight into employees' perceptions, attitudes, and experiences regarding ethical behavior within institutions (Ljubojević, 2021). Existing literature indicates that there is still insufficient research offering practical recommendations for improving ethical standards and addressing shortcomings in organizational practice (Lešić, 2025). Therefore, further empirical research is necessary to better understand the challenges related to the implementation of ethical principles in public administration.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK AND DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SAMPLE

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design within a single-case study framework in a public sector institution in Belgrade, Serbia. The research focused on examining employees' perceptions of ethical principles and standards of professional conduct in public administration.

The survey was conducted anonymously in order to encourage honest responses and reduce the possibility of bias or discomfort among participants. Personal data such as names and surnames were not collected, and participation in the research was entirely voluntary. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants in accordance with domestic and international ethical research standards. The study was approved by the relevant Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Participants and Sample

A total of 100 employees from a public administration institution participated in the survey process. After the initial review of responses, 22 questionnaires were excluded from the analysis due to incomplete or invalid data. The final sample therefore consisted of 78 valid questionnaires.

The excluded questionnaires were removed for several reasons:

- 7 questionnaires were incomplete, with a significant number of unanswered questions;
- 3 responses did not meet the predefined participation criteria related to employment status, length of service, or belonging to the target group;
- 4 questionnaires contained illogical or contradictory answers;
- 2 questionnaires showed uniform response patterns (“straight-lining”), indicating insufficient attention while completing the survey;
- 6 responses were identified as duplicates and excluded to preserve data validity.

Although 22 questionnaires were excluded, the remaining sample provided sufficient data for the analysis of employees’ perceptions regarding ethical principles and professional conduct in public administration.

Research Instrument and Data Collection

Data were collected using a purpose-designed questionnaire created and distributed through the Qualtrics online survey platform. The questionnaire included closed-ended and semi-open questions related to:

- knowledge of ethical principles and codes of conduct,
- perceptions of unethical behavior in the workplace,
- application of ethical standards in practice,
- and challenges related to ethics in public administration.

Closed-ended questions enabled structured statistical analysis, while semi-open questions allowed respondents to express their personal opinions and experiences regarding ethical behavior and professional standards.

The questionnaire was distributed anonymously via e-mail, allowing employees to complete it independently and without external influence. The use of the Qualtrics platform facilitated data collection, organization, and export for further statistical processing.

The research was conducted between August 6, 2025, and February 1, 2026. The sample represented approximately 15% of employees within the observed organizational unit of public administration.

Research Questions

The main research question of this study was:

- To what extent are employees in public administration familiar with ethical principles and standards of professional conduct?

In addition to the main research question, the study examined:

- employees' knowledge of ethical codes,
- perceptions of unethical behavior in the workplace,
- the practical application of ethical principles,
- and the main challenges related to the implementation of ethics in public administration.

The research also aimed to identify possible measures for improving ethical awareness, professional responsibility, and institutional support within public administration.

CONCEPTUALIZATION AND DESIGN OF THE SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

During the research process, attention was paid to achieving balanced representation across sectors within the observed public administration institution. Such an approach enabled a more comprehensive understanding of employees' perceptions regarding ethical standards and professional conduct within the organizational structure. The survey questionnaire was designed to examine employees' attitudes toward ethical principles and standards of professional behavior in public administration. The questionnaire was developed in accordance with the research objectives, focusing on:

- knowledge of ethical principles,
- the practical application of ethical standards,
- perceptions of unethical behavior,
- and challenges related to the implementation of ethics in public administration.

The questionnaire consisted of several thematic sections. The introductory section included optional demographic questions intended to provide a general overview of the respondent structure.

The remaining sections were organized as follows:

- the first section examined employees' familiarity with ethical principles and codes of conduct in public administration;
- the second section focused on the application of ethical standards in everyday professional activities;

- the third section addressed perceptions of unethical behavior within the organization;
- the fourth section examined the main challenges in implementing ethical standards, including insufficient education, lack of supervision, and organizational pressures.

Both closed-ended and semi-open questions were used in order to collect quantitative data while also allowing respondents to express personal views and experiences. Special attention was devoted to the clarity and comprehensibility of the questions in order to minimize the possibility of misinterpretation and increase response reliability. The study was based on the understanding that ethical principles in public administration include legality, impartiality, transparency, professionalism, responsibility, and protection of the public interest. Ethical conduct in public institutions is essential for strengthening citizens' trust in public administration and improving institutional accountability.

Although the sample size represents a limitation of the study, the research provides useful empirical insight into the implementation of ethical principles in public administration. The findings may serve as a basis for future research in other public institutions and organisations, particularly in studies examining ethical leadership, organisational culture, and professional responsibility.

The use of survey research as a methodological instrument enabled the collection of relevant information regarding employees' perceptions and experiences related to ethics in public administration. Previous studies have also emphasised the importance of ethical leadership and its influence on organisational responsibility and human resource management (Azhar, Iqbal, & Imran, 2025).

SURVEY RESULTS OF CASE STUDY IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

The survey results indicate that employees perceive insufficient control and supervision as one of the main challenges in the implementation of ethical standards in public administration. Approximately 40% of respondents identified the lack of internal control mechanisms, supervision, or auditing procedures as a significant factor contributing to inconsistent ethical behavior within the institution.

According to respondents' perceptions, stronger institutional supervision and clearer monitoring procedures could contribute to more consistent implementation of professional standards and ethical conduct. At the same time, organizational pressures were identified as a less frequent, but still relevant challenge, reported by 12% of respondents. The findings also suggest that some employees primarily focus on fulfilling operational tasks and professional obligations, while ethical standards are not always perceived as an essential aspect of everyday work. Nevertheless, respondents generally recognized the importance of ethical behavior, professional communication, and respectful interpersonal relations within public administration.

The results indicate that employee satisfaction tends to be higher in organizational environments where professional standards, ethical conduct, and positive workplace relations are consistently promoted by management. In contrast, lower levels of satisfaction were associated with perceived absence of ethical behavior, inadequate communication, and poor professional relations among employees and supervisors. As previously described in the methodology section, the research was conducted anonymously and with the informed consent of both employees and management representatives. Participation in the survey was voluntary and did not affect employees' professional status or workplace responsibilities. The consents obtained were aligned with domestic and international ethical research standards. The results of the study are presented in the following graphs and tables, which illustrate employees' attitudes toward ethical principles and standards of professional conduct in public administration. Regarding gender structure, the sample consisted of 42 male respondents (53.8%) and 36 female respondents (46.2%).

In terms of work experience:

- 15 respondents (19.2%) had up to 5 years of work experience;
- 27 respondents (34.6%) had between 6 and 10 years of experience;
- 25 respondents (32.1%) had between 11 and 20 years of experience;
- 11 respondents (14.1%) had more than 20 years of work experience.

With respect to job position:

- 42 respondents (53.8%) occupied operational (non-managerial) positions;
- 36 respondents (46.2%) held managerial positions.

The structure of the sample, including gender, years of work experience, and job position of the respondents, is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample Structure of Respondents

Variable	Category	Number (N)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	42	53.8%
	Female	36	46.2%
Work experience	Up to 5 years	15	19.2%
	6–10 years	27	34.6%
	11–20 years	25	32.1%
	Over 20 years	11	14.1%
Job position	Operational	42	53.8%
	Managerial	36	46.2%

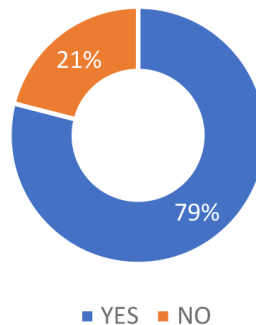
Source: *Author*

The survey results indicate that the majority of respondents are familiar with ethical principles in public administration. Specifically, 79% of respondents stated that they understand the concept of ethics and recognize the importance of ethical principles

and standards of professional conduct within public administration. In contrast, 21% of respondents reported limited familiarity with ethical principles or believed that such principles are insufficiently implemented in practice. These findings suggest that, although ethical awareness is generally present among employees, a significant proportion of respondents still lack sufficient understanding of ethical standards and their practical application in public administration.

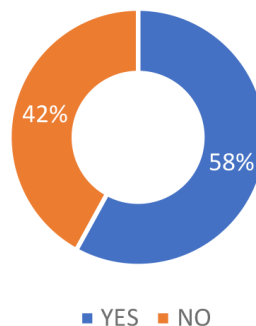
Graph 1 presents respondents' answers regarding their familiarity with ethical principles in public administration.

Graph 1. Familiarity with ethics in public administration



The application of ethical principles in practice is presented in Graph 2. The results show that 58% of respondents believe that ethical principles are consistently applied in public administration, while 42% consider their application to be inconsistent. These findings indicate that challenges related to the implementation of ethical standards are still present within public administration. The results suggest a need for additional employee education, stronger institutional support, and clearer mechanisms for monitoring compliance with ethical standards and professional conduct.

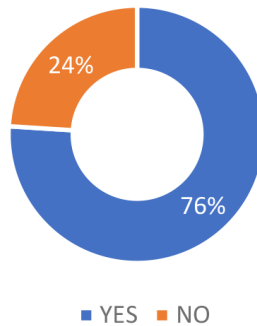
Graph 2. Applied ethical behavior in management



The presence of unethical behavior is presented in Graph 3. The results indicate that 76% of respondents reported the existence of unethical behavior within public administration,

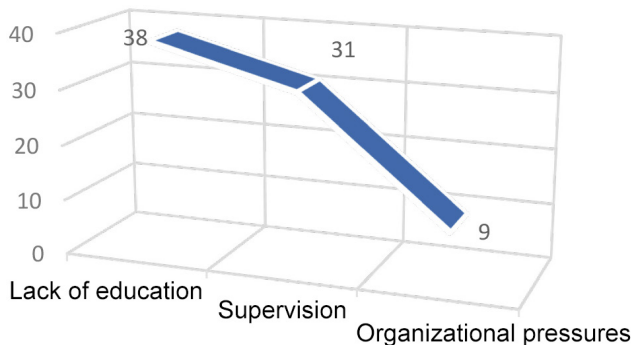
while 24% of respondents did not perceive such behavior. These findings suggest that a significant proportion of employees perceive unethical practices in the workplace, which may indicate the need for strengthened institutional control, education, and reinforcement of ethical standards. In numerical terms, 59 respondents reported the presence of unethical behavior, while 19 respondents did not identify such practices. Overall, the results point to differing perceptions among employees regarding the extent to which ethical standards are applied in practice.

Graph 3. Presence of ethical and unethical behavior



Graph 4 presents respondents' perceptions of the main obstacles to the implementation of ethical principles in public administration. The results show that 49% of respondents (38 individuals) identified insufficient education as the primary challenge in applying ethical standards. This is followed by 40% of respondents (31 individuals) who indicated a lack of adequate supervision and monitoring of employees' work as a significant factor contributing to weaknesses in ethical practice. Finally, 12% of respondents (9 individuals) identified organizational pressure as the main obstacle to the consistent application of ethical principles. Overall, the findings suggest that insufficient education and inadequate supervision are perceived as the most important barriers to effective implementation of ethical standards in public administration.

Graph 4. The biggest problem in the application of ethics



DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION

The results of the study indicate that, although a majority of employees are familiar with ethical principles, their consistent application in practice remains limited. The main challenges identified - insufficient education and inadequate supervision - support theoretical assumptions that the existence of formal ethical codes alone is not sufficient to ensure ethical behavior without effective implementation mechanisms.

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in deontological ethics (Kant, 2008), virtue ethics (Aristotle, 2009), theories of justice and public interest (Rawls, 1971), bureaucratic organization theory (Weber, 1978), and contemporary approaches to public administration such as the New Public Service model (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015). These theoretical perspectives collectively emphasize the importance of duty, institutional responsibility, fairness, and public service orientation in shaping ethical behavior in public administration. The findings of the survey suggest a discrepancy between awareness of ethical principles and their practical implementation. While 79% of respondents reported familiarity with ethical standards, 42% indicated that these principles are not applied consistently in practice. In addition, 76% of respondents reported the presence of unethical behavior in their work environment, which further highlights challenges in the practical enforcement of ethical norms.

Regarding specific influencing factors, insufficient education (49%) and weak supervision (40%) were identified as the most significant barriers to the effective implementation of ethical principles. Organizational pressures (12%) were also reported, although to a lesser extent. These findings suggest that ethical behavior in public administration depends not only on individual awareness, but also on institutional capacity, leadership, and control mechanisms.

Overall, the results indicate that effective implementation of ethical standards requires a combined approach, including clear codes of conduct, continuous employee education, effective supervision, and consistent application of disciplinary and organizational procedures. Strengthening these mechanisms may contribute to improving ethical behavior and professional standards in public administration. The concept of transparency and access to information in public administration is grounded in legal frameworks such as the Law on Free Access to Information of Public Importance, which defines information of public interest as any information held by public authorities and related to their work that is relevant to citizens. In this context, public administration operates under continuous public scrutiny, which places additional responsibility on employees to act in accordance with legal and ethical standards.

Public sector employees are increasingly expected to uphold principles of transparency, accountability, and professional integrity, while also being aware that their work is subject to public oversight. Previous studies confirm that ethical leadership and organizational support contribute significantly to employee commitment and ethical behavior in public institutions (Hakimi, 2025; Alherz & Hadi, 2025). The literature further emphasizes that

ethical principles are essential for ensuring trust between citizens and public institutions. Business and administrative ethics are therefore not only normative frameworks but also practical mechanisms that support responsible decision-making, transparency, and long-term organizational effectiveness (Aleksić, 2007; Gluhaković, 2021). In public administration, this includes responsiveness to citizens' needs, legal compliance, and protection of employee rights through institutional mechanisms such as internal reporting systems and designated oversight bodies.

The findings of this study align with previous research highlighting the importance of organizational responsibility and ethical leadership in promoting ethical behavior. The presence of institutional mechanisms for reporting unethical conduct, including protection against discrimination and workplace abuse, is an important component of ethical public administration systems. Contemporary literature also highlights the increasing importance of digital transformation in public administration. While technological development can enhance transparency and efficiency, it also introduces new ethical challenges related to data management, accountability, and organizational responsibility (Musri, 2022; Grigalashvili, 2025; Mišić et al., 2025; Vataman & Tofan, 2025). Accordingly, ethical frameworks must adapt to technological changes in order to ensure responsible governance in digital environments.

Ethical leadership has been widely recognized as a key factor in improving organizational performance, employee satisfaction, and institutional reputation. Studies show that organizations that integrate ethical principles into their strategic and operational processes achieve higher levels of trust, commitment, and effectiveness (Lisse, 2017; Chayabutra & Ueasangkomsate, 2025).

Within this context, ethical codes serve as important guiding instruments for decision-making and professional conduct. However, their effectiveness depends on consistent implementation, organizational culture, and employee awareness (Krankan, 2024). In addition, ethical considerations are increasingly relevant in areas such as recruitment, negotiation, public relations, and human resource management, where professional decisions have direct ethical implications (Čabarkapa, 2015; Kvesić, 2024; Milas, 2012). The results of this study confirm that ethical principles in public administration are generally recognized as important, but their consistent application in practice remains a challenge. This suggests a gap between formal ethical frameworks and everyday organizational behavior. Similar findings have been reported in previous studies, which highlight the need for continuous education, stronger institutional support, and effective monitoring mechanisms.

Although the number of respondents in case study research is often limited, such studies provide valuable exploratory insights into organizational behavior and employee perceptions. Rather than limiting their relevance, case studies contribute to a deeper understanding of specific institutional contexts and can serve as a foundation for further, more extensive research. Overall, the findings suggest that strengthening ethical awareness, improving organizational mechanisms, and ensuring consistent application of ethical standards are essential for enhancing public trust and the quality of public administration.

CONCLUSION

This study examined employees' perceptions of ethical principles and standards of professional conduct in public administration. The findings indicate that, although employees are generally familiar with ethical principles, their consistent application in practice is not always ensured. The identified challenges suggest a gap between theoretical knowledge of ethics and its practical implementation in the workplace. The results highlight the importance of strengthening ethical awareness, improving organizational culture, and ensuring continuous education and effective monitoring mechanisms. These factors are essential for enhancing professional behavior, improving the quality of public services, and strengthening citizens' trust in public administration institutions. The study also indicates that ethical behavior should be understood both as an individual responsibility and an institutional value embedded in organizational processes, including human resource management, decision-making, and strategic planning. Promoting professional integrity is therefore crucial for the functioning of modern public administration and broader societal trust (Franeta, 2025).

Practical Implications

The findings suggest that public administration institutions should focus on developing clear ethical guidelines, continuous training programs, and stronger supervisory mechanisms. Strengthening ethical culture within organisations may contribute to more consistent application of professional standards and improved employee awareness of ethical responsibilities.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has certain limitations, primarily related to the sample size and the use of a single-case study design. Future research should include a larger number of participants and multiple public administration institutions in order to improve generalizability. It is also recommended that future studies apply mixed methods approaches to gain a more comprehensive understanding of ethical behavior in practice.

Further research could also include comparative analyses across different public administrations and longitudinal studies that would examine changes over time, particularly following the implementation of organizational improvements aimed at strengthening ethical standards.

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Etički principi i standardi profesionalnog ponašanja u javnoj upravi, studija slučaja u Srbiji

Apstrakt: Ovaj rad ima za cilj da prikaže rezultate istraživanja o nivou svesti i prisutnosti etičkih principa u javnoj upravi. Nalazi služe kao pokazatelji ponašanja državnih službenika. Rezultati pomažu u utvrđivanju da li su etičke norme adekvatno zastupljene u formalnom smislu. Studija je takođe ispitivala tvrdnje o tome da li je funkcionisanje procesa u javnoj upravi moguće ukoliko ne postoji dosledna primena etike i efikasan institucionalni nadzor. Zaključak istraživanja jeste da jačanje etičke kulture u javnoj upravi — kroz edukaciju i odgovornost javnih službenika — predstavlja ključni preduslov za izgradnju kvalitetnih profesionalnih odnosa. Konkretno, to doprinosi unapređenju kvaliteta javnih usluga i povećanju zadovoljstva zaposlenih. Obavljanje poslova bez etičke osnove nije preporučljivo u javnoj upravi, jer utiče na ukupni kvalitet radnih odnosa i zadovoljstvo zaposlenih. Predloženi pravac za dalja istraživanja jeste ispitivanje uticaja na radne stavove zaposlenih u situacijama kada se etički principi ne primenjuju.

Ključne reči: javna uprava, etika, standardi profesionalnog ponašanja, studija slučaja, Srbija.