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ETHICAL MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT

A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF FACTORS  
CONTRIBUTING TO ETHICAL MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT

By

Elizabeth J. Webb

Montana State University

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Qualitative Research Methods

Dr. Elisabeth Swanson

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# A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO ETHICAL MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT

## A Qualitative Analysis of Factors Contributing to Ethical Municipal Government

### **Introduction**

#### Background

In today's polarized political environment, it is commonplace to open a newspaper and discover a story highlighting the ethical violations of an elected official or government employee. Ethics news stories quickly gain national, and occasionally, international attention. Examples have included ethics investigations into campaign practices, public employee's use of personnel to perform manual labor on private property during work hours, accepting gifts that could influence decision-making, and using public office for private gain. Public mistrust of government is at a record high, the tea party is demanding a smaller and more efficient government, and procedure hawks are challenging government decisions through litigation. The perception of compromised ethics is a significant obstacle to small municipal governments in delivering essential services effectively. Issues facing local government will continue to grow more complex as a result of a devolving federal system, changing demographics, economic hard times, and declining resources and revenues.

A Pew Research Center (2010) study reported that Americans are less positive and more critical of government than in the past. Paralyzing partisan politics, public discontent, an on-going economic recession, and criticism of Congress and elected officials are all contributing to distrust in government. The study revealed that just 22% say they can trust the government in Washington D.C. and 51% now see the impact of their local government as positive, down from 64% in 1997 (Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 2010).

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## Ethics programs

The 2007 National Government Ethics Survey, along with supplemental research reports completed by the Ethics Resource Center in 2010, introduced areas for risk management in the ethics arena. Research has shown that well-implemented ethics and compliance programs double reporting and lower the rate of misconduct (ERC, 2008). In its research on the impact of codes of conduct on corporate culture (LRN, 2006) the report finds that managers and employees make countless decisions that are based on the code. Three out of four people who work at an organization with a written code say that their code helps them understand the behaviors that are valued by the organization. More than eight out of ten employees apply their understanding of the code frequently on the job. However, the mere existence of an ethics program does not imply that it is effective (Mitchell et al., 1996). Effectiveness is determined by the manner in which it is developed, implemented, and embedded, along with the content and quality of each component (Kaptein & Schwartz, 2008).

## Ethics training

West & Berman (2006) note that roughly 64% of cities in the USA offer some form of ethics training, although only 36% call it “ethics training.” Training provides managers with leverage to attain ethics goals. It is associated with fostering organizational cultures of openness, accountability, and performance that are in turn associated with increased employee productivity. Training also helps employees apply ethical concepts to their real-life work situations and identify strategies for dealing with ethical dilemmas. Trevino et al. (2001) discusses that if employees are aware of ethical and legal issues, they will be more likely to ask the right questions and do the right thing when faced with an ethical dilemma. Employees can do the

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wrong thing simply because they are unaware or do not know where to go for assistance on difficult matters. Maesschalck (2004) notes a continuum between compliance and integrity which should guide ethics training development in the public sector. Compliance involves external controls on the behavior of public servants and often involves rules that employees choose to follow (right) or not (wrong). The integrity approach involves internal controls including moral judgment and moral character. This continuum points to the need to develop training programs that educate on codes of ethics and rules, as well as interactive training sessions to stimulate moral character and improve ethical decision-making. Berman & West (1994) had a similar perspective to Maesschalck. Training is shifting from minimizing wrong doing to building trust among employees and customers of public services. Additional research (Klugman et al., 2006; Frisque & Kolb, 2008) indicates that training does not change employee's values, but increases critical thinking and appreciating others' viewpoints, and heightens awareness of ethical issues and increases mindfulness of an employee's own behavior. Weber (2006) discusses what Duquesne University learned about their ethics initiative; that a commitment to ethics must be deeply embedded into the culture, that there must be widespread communication about the ethics initiative, that the training and leadership be centralized, that there is ownership among faculty and students, and that the program must be continually improved and updated. Jovanic & Wood (2008) assert that ethics training cannot take place just once in a training room, but needs on-going support at all levels of the organization. The training should include what ethics is, along with actual examples of relevant situations, and how to explore an ethical dilemma through interacting with others. Frisque & Kolb (2008) underscore the importance of post-training support as a critical step in maintaining learned behaviors.

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## Ethical culture and climate

The organizational culture in which behavior takes place is gaining more attention in ethics discussions. The Ethics and Compliance Officer Association (ECO, 2011) funded a research report that reflects the need to create a positive ethical culture, so that the broader environment does not fill the void in the absence of that direction. A strong ethical culture increases reporting and cuts misconduct in half (ERC, 2010). When both a well-implemented ethics and compliance program and a strong ethical culture are in place, misconduct drops by 60% and reporting rises by 40% (ERC, 2008). A study of an ethics initiative in City of Denver (Jovanic, 2007) was conducted to determine how talking about ethics contributes to an ethical culture. The Denver study points to the need to include a variety of interventions to address ethical culture from a systems and communications perspective. Additional research (Trevino et al., 1999; Trevino et al., 2001) connects positive ethical cultures to lower rates of observed misconduct, higher rates of reporting misconduct to leadership, reduced pressure to compromise standards, greater satisfaction with management's response to misconduct, greater satisfaction to the organization as a whole, lowered exposure to situations involving misconduct, and an increased sense of preparedness to handle situations involving misconduct.

## Ethical leadership

The Ethics and Compliance Officer Association (ECO, 2009) research report highlights the primary role that leaders play in the creation of the culture and climate (through modeling, coaching, and communication). The leader's ability to promote ethical conduct is critical in defining doing what is right within the organization. The best ethics program will not create an ethical culture if management implemented the program to protect themselves from blame (Wah,

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1999). Employees need to hear supervisors talk about ethics and act in ways that model ethical behavior. Managers and employees who are informed by ethics have an added edge because they are more likely to know the right thing to do, to undertake those actions, to justify actions on the basis of professional and moral criteria, and to protect themselves from being blindsided by allegations of ethical impropriety (West & Berman, 2006). These are critical competencies for today's managers. Managers who act without regard to professional ethics risk their careers, the reputations of their local governments, and risk losing the public trust.

### Context

It is unfortunate that within the current climate of mistrust in government, the National Government Ethics Survey (ERC, 2008) demonstrated that misconduct in government is very high. One in four government employees works in an environment conducive to misconduct. Strength of ethical culture in government is declining while pressure to commit misconduct is growing (ERC, 2008). Local governments across the USA provide essential services to the public which include water and sewer systems, police, fire, and libraries. When the public lacks trust in their local elected officials, it is difficult to provide these services effectively. Raising rates to cover costs becomes suspect, and a pro-active approach to planning in municipal government is challenging when officials' motives are questioned at every step. Effective ethics programs that reduce misconduct, along with the establishment of strong ethical culture and ethical leadership, may be part of the solution to the rift between public perceptions of mistrust and providing essential government services.

In Montana, elected officials, appointed officials, and government employees are bound by the Montana State Code of Ethics (MCA 2-2-101 – 2-2-144). However, most are not supplied

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with a copy of the Code or training regarding the Code. An informal survey of municipal clerks in Montana revealed that 75% of municipalities do not give new employees a copy of the Montana State Code of Ethics upon hire and 93% of municipalities provide no training on ethics to their employees (conducted by *Survey Monkey*, October 2011, emailed by list serve to 129 Montana municipalities, 45 responses or 35%).

Where national ethics surveys have contributed to research findings collectively among local, state and federal governments (ERC, 2008), little has been done to study individual units of government and the effectiveness of local ethics programs. Three studies (Jovanic, 2007; Frisque & Kolb, 2008; Pelletier & Bligh, 2006) recommended additional research into the effectiveness and impact of ethics trainings on employees and ethical culture.

In the state of Montana, there are 129 incorporated cities and towns, and 56 counties. The results of this study may serve to guide the development and/or improvement of ethics programs in municipalities and counties across the state. Research suggests that municipal governments, taking active steps in implementing ethics training programs and strengthening ethical culture, can make a significant difference in ethics risk management and restoring public trust (ERC, 2008).

### **Study Design “Front Matter”**

#### Overarching purpose

January 2008 marked the date when a revision to the Bozeman City Charter was enacted. The charter revisions, initiated by citizens in Bozeman in response to ethical questions about high profile City decision-making, mandated the creation of an independent Board of Ethics and annual training for appointed and elected City officials and City employees (City of Bozeman,

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Code of Ordinances, 2008). Since then, an independent Board of Ethics has been established and an Ethics Handbook has been written and distributed to all employees, elected and appointed officials. Two series of ethics trainings have been conducted (2009, 2010/2011) and the third is nearing completion. In 2012, it is timely to ask whether the implementation of an ethics program has resulted in a more ethical organization.

A quantitative pilot study was conducted in 2011 (Webb, unpublished 2011). After three years, a significant difference was shown comparing the City of Bozeman employees (with an ethics program) to the City of Kalispell employees (without a formal ethics program). Significant differences were demonstrated in the areas of ethics code awareness (policy guides employees in decision-making; employees have read the code; employees understand the code; employees know the city's ethical expectations; employees know that policies exist), ethics resources (resources are available; it is easy to get help; staff are available), and ethics program effectiveness (program is effective; ethics issues are handled in a confidential manner; the program has increased employee's trust in city; the city concerned about ethical standards). However, no significant differences were demonstrated in observations of misconduct, reporting of misconduct, or other measures of perceptions of ethical culture (ethical decision-making process, informal ethical norms, ethical leadership).

This study will provide a qualitative exploration of the City of Bozeman's ethics program and its impact on employees. As part of the ethics training design for 2012, employees participated in ethics scenarios and discussions and their input was solicited about ways to strengthen ethical behavior within the City.

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## Theoretical perspective

The theoretical perspective for this qualitative study is organizational culture theory. Organizational culture theory attempts to explain behavior within organizations and among organizations. It is concerned with how members of a group live and make sense of the world. This theory views culture as a lens through which members interpret, interact, and make sense of reality. Patterns of behavior, values, attitudes, and beliefs of its members are considered (Schein, 2004). In this qualitative study, two groups of employees will be compared; supervisors and non-supervisory employees. Group responses will be compared and contrasted.

## Research Questions

A review of the literature and recommendations from the pilot quantitative research study led to the following research questions:

Research Question 1: How do two groups of municipal employees (supervisory and non-supervisory) perceive the strength of the ethical culture in their municipality (weak – medium – strong)?

Research Question 2: What steps do two groups of municipal employees (supervisory and non-supervisory) believe their municipality should take to strengthen the ethical culture?

Research Question 3: What role should City leadership play in strengthening the ethical culture?

Research Question 4: What do City employees want out of the Ethics Policy, Board of Ethics and the Ethics Trainings?

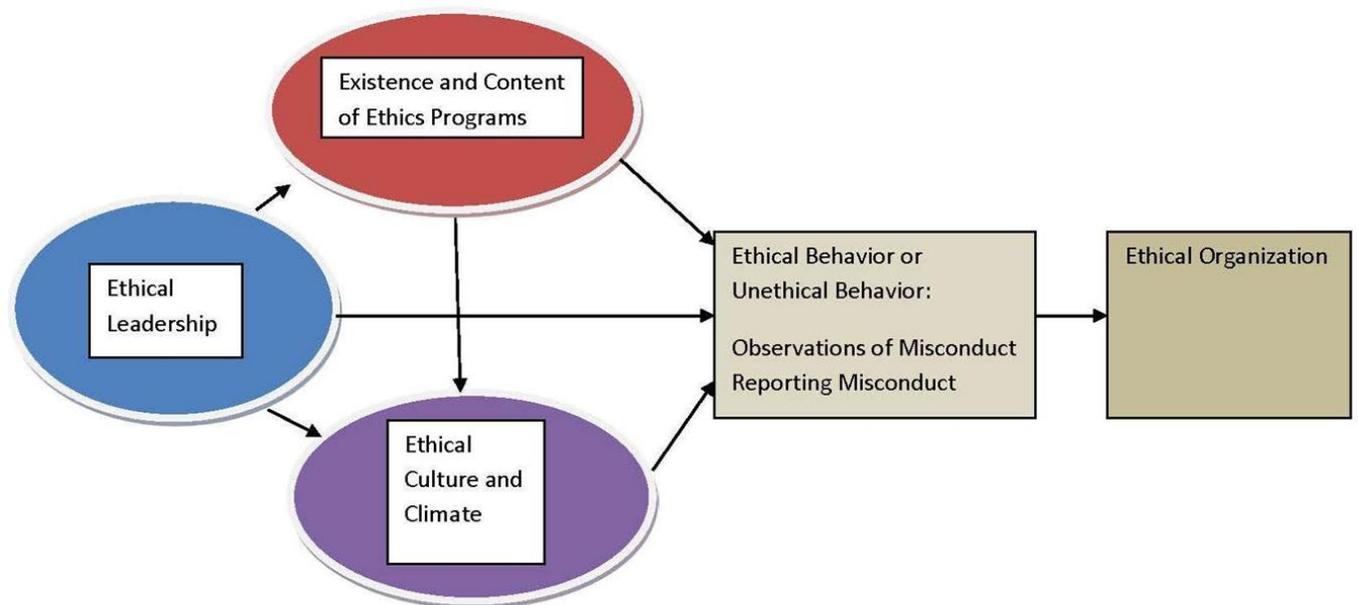
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## Study Design “Core Processes”

### Concept map

Figure 1 is a visual depiction of the components of an effective ethics program. West & Berman (2006) demonstrate the interconnectedness of an ethics system. Their model considers the instruments and programs in place to teach employees about ethics and to provide guidelines for their behavior (for example, a code of ethics and trainings). This model also addresses the role of leadership in setting the tone for the organization and the ethics of management. Finally, the ethical climate and culture in which organizational decisions are made are included as a factor. The influence of these three factors results in support for ethical or unethical behaviors.

Figure 1. Concept map for an ethical organization



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## Design Strategy

The design strategy for this study is purposeful sampling. The case for study is the City of Bozeman as a municipal government organization. With over 300 employees, data gathered will provide rich information and will be a good indication of the phenomenon of interest: organizational ethics. The sample will generate insight about municipal ethics as it pertains to the City of Bozeman (Patton, 2002).

## Data Collection for fieldwork strategy

The data collected will be qualitative in nature. Thirteen 90-minute ethics training sessions, involving 300 City employees, will include small group discussions which address the research questions. Direct quotations from individuals and small groups will be captured, along with flip chart notes from each small group discussion. The resulting rich data will be reviewed for emerging themes. I will be conducting all thirteen training sessions, allowing for direct contact with both groups of informants; supervisors and non-supervisory employees. I am not an employee of the City, and will provide the trainings from a neutral consulting role. Empathetic neutrality and mindfulness will be part of the fieldwork strategy. I will work with the City staff in a non-judgmental way, showing respect, responsiveness, and support for the work of the municipal government (Patton, 2002).

## Methods of data collection

The unit of analysis for this study is structure focused. The unit is the organization; the City of Bozeman municipal government. The sampling is stratified purposeful sampling. Two subgroups of employees within the organization are of interest; supervisors and non-supervisory employees. Separating the groups will facilitate comparisons (Patton, 2002). The sample size

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for this study is 300. There are 236 non-supervisory employees and 64 supervisors. In qualitative research methods, multiple perspectives must be systematically sought during research inquiry (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). The design of this study allows for multiple perspectives on a large scale. The number of trainings and employees will allow for rich data from which to synthesize conclusions and recommendations. Responses by supervisory groups of employees will be compared and contrasted with non-supervisory employees.

In each training session, anonymous clicker responses will be saved electronically. Flip chart notes from each small group will be collected. I will take observational field notes and will log quotes from individuals and small group reports.

### Analysis strategy

The analysis strategy will be inductive analysis and creative synthesis (Patton, 2002). With thirteen 90-minute trainings involving 300 employees working in 50 small groups, I will have the opportunity to become immersed in the data. Important patterns and themes will emerge. Inductive analysis begins with exploring the data, confirming what is emerging, and ending with creative synthesis. This approach will work well with the copious amount of data generated from the trainings and small group discussions.

### Data analysis

Three sessions were conducted for supervisors (64 individuals) and 10 sessions were conducted for non-supervisory employees (236 individuals). The trainings took place in 3 different locations, within a 3-week period of time from late March to early April 2012.

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Anonymous electronic clicker responses were saved, flip chart notes from 50 different small group discussions (3-10 in each small group) were gathered, and field observation notes were kept.

Since the trainings spanned a 3-week period of time, I transcribed notes as the data was available. After each training session, the flip chart notes were transcribed to a word document, organized by research question. The bullet items from the flip charts were transcribed verbatim. As additional training sessions took place, I added new data and aligned the incoming data to content areas or themes that were emerging. I also kept track of the number of times a specific theme was mentioned by a small discussion group and tallied these frequencies. The supervisor sessions were analyzed separately from the non-supervisory employee sessions. This was done for ease in comparison after all the data was collected. Field observation notes were checked against the flip chart data to ensure consistency among the multiple measures (triangulation). Field observation notes also included direct quotations of what individuals actually said to provide meaning to the shorter, bulleted items on the flip charts. Clicker responses were reviewed to provide another method of triangulation.

### Analysis of training content

In the manifest-content analysis, the supervisors and non-supervisory employees were treated as separate data sets in order to allow potentially different perspectives to emerge (Trevino et al., 2003). Flip chart notes were read carefully, analyzed by question, and emerging categories were identified. Once all the training sessions were completed and the notes added to the data set, overall themes were named. The same themes emerged in the responses to more than one of the research questions (for example, clarity in ethics guidelines). To avoid redundancy, I then determined which research question to assign to that particular theme and the

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total number of times a theme emerged was counted. To strengthen this study, content analysis would be more effective if more than one person(s) reviewed the content and classified the data into the themes (inter-rater reliability).

### Measures to enhance research quality and credibility

The fall 2011 quantitative research study of the ethics program within the City of Bozeman provided the context for this spring 2012 qualitative study. Recommendations from that study were utilized in this design (Webb, unpublished 2011). I have served as the author/researcher for both studies, and I personally delivered the 13 training sessions used to gather qualitative information here.

Maxwell (2005) introduces the concept of researcher bias. He identifies a threat to the validity of qualitative conclusions in selecting data that fit the researcher's existing theory or preconceptions. Since I have studied the ethics topic with the City previously, this would appear to be a possible threat. However, this study produced a large amount of data across various training dates and locations and some very strong themes emerged. I was aware of my investment in the ethics trainings with the City, and solicited input and feedback from my colleagues at the Local Government Center, from professionals within the City of Bozeman, and from my professor and classmates in EDCI 507. The very large sample size here helps to neutralize bias by the researcher.

Maxwell (2005) also discusses the influence of the researcher on the setting, or researcher reactivity. As the trainer for all 13 ethics training sessions, I was aware of my influence in designing and guiding the discussions. To minimize my personal influence, I followed a script for the trainings and provided the research questions visually on a power point slide so that the

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small groups could read them and refer to them while working together. I was not involved in the small group discussions as they answered the questions and came up with solutions and suggestions for the City. Coming from an empathetic neutrality and mindfulness orientation, I was conscious of not leading the discussion in certain directions, and instead asking clarifying questions to better understand the viewpoints of a particular individual or small group during the group reporting.

Maxwell (2005) provides a checklist of validity tests. For the current study, there was intensive, long-term involvement with the organization. Repeated observations were part of this study (over 13 trainings). This study produced rich data from 300 employees attending 13 trainings sessions, resulting in 50 small groups for discussion of the research questions.

Triangulation is based on the premise that no single method will solve the problem of competing explanations (Patton, 2002). To avoid the bias that comes from single methods, single observers, or single theories, the strategy of triangulation is incorporated into the design. In this study, triangulation steps included multiple measures (anonymous electronic clicker responses, flip chart notes, observation field notes, and verbal reports), multiple sources (13 separate trainings held in 3 different locations, at different times of the day, with two sets of key informants – supervisors and non-supervisory employees), and multiple researchers (trainings and questions were designed by Local Government Center staff, the City of Bozeman ethics resource staff, and were commented and reviewed by EDCI doctoral students and professor).

Although recordings would have been useful and would have added to the depth of this study, the training sessions were not recorded by audio or visual means due to confidentiality and sensitivity of the issues. There was a level of nervousness about open discussion of ethics by

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employees within the City. This was also experienced during the Fall 2011 quantitative on-line survey. Concerns were expressed about whether responses were truly anonymous and the potential of retaliation for honest negative responses. During the small group discussions for non-supervisory employees, I asked any managers present to leave the room. This allowed for more open responses by the non-supervisory employees.

### **Findings**

The 2012 ethics trainings for the City of Bozeman began on March 21. Between March 21 and April 6, a series of 13 trainings were offered. Morning, afternoon, and evening hours were scheduled to allow for the greatest flexibility in meeting the needs of employees who were mandated to attend. Three locations were utilized; the City Commission room at City Hall, the training room in the Public Works building, and the municipal court room at the Law & Justice Center. These three rooms had entirely different atmospheres for training.

The municipal court room was the least conducive to open discussion. The three trainings in the court room took place late in the evening (9:30 pm – 11:00 pm) to accommodate shifts and consisted of the smallest numbers in attendance. To access the Law & Justice building at night, an intercom and buzzer system had to be used. After gaining entry, it was obvious that the business of the day had come to a close. Only the custodial workers were visibly present, although the lights were on in the police section of the building, behind glass dividers. Someone had to unlock the court room to let us in. The chairs in the municipal court room are like church pews with rigid backs and are arranged in straight rows. They are bolted to the floor and cannot be moved to facilitate group discussion. A blank white wall was used to set up the projector and power point, and there was a clear immovable divider between where the participants sat and

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where I had to set up the projector. The groups who attended the three evening sessions were small in number and represented several departments. Group discussions were not as robust, almost as if the trials of the day had left a residue in the room. The building at that time of night was very quiet.

In contrast, the City Commission room at City Hall was large and filled with natural light. The room holds over 150 people. Rectangular tables were spread out through the room with 5-6 chairs at each table. At the front of the room is a half-oval of formal desks where the City Commissioners sit for Commission meetings. There is a large window in the room. The electronics in this room were top-notch. Two large flat screens were available for viewing; there was no need to set up a projector against a white wall. My laptop easily connected to a larger system which made set up easy. Snacks, coffee and water were available to participants. These City Hall sessions were held during the day from 8:30 – 10:00 am, 10:30 am – noon, 1:00 – 2:30 pm, or 5:00 pm – 6:30 pm. Employees usually filled up the room from the back or middle. I had to request that employees move to tables with clickers and other materials, rather than sitting at the back of the room. It appeared that employees who arrived 15 minutes early wanted to grab a coveted spot at the back. Those who wandered in at start time, or a little late, were left with front tables. This room had a much more professional feel to it than the Municipal Court Room. The Municipal Court was more stifled and enclosed. Employees entered this room and quickly chatted with others and helped themselves to the available refreshments.

The third location was the training room at the Public Works building. This was my favorite venue. There was a lot of activity going on in the Public Works building every time I arrived. Upon entering the building, there are receptionists right beyond the door who greet and welcome visitors. The training room was smaller than the City Commission room, but had good

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lighting and rectangular tables that were conducive to discussion. The room wasn't as large, or as formal, and participants appeared more at ease with each other. The electronics here were also easy to use, with a laptop hook up, ceiling mounted projector, and a large screen. Again, this room filled up from the back to the front, and those who came late ended up in the front row. These trainings also took place during the day from 8:30 – 10:00 am, 10:30 am – noon, or 1:00 – 2:30 pm. There was a break room next door and I would sometimes see employees from previous sessions in the room. They would often greet me and ask me how I was doing.

Ethics trainings are mandated by City charter and there were a lot of employees to move through the trainings in the few weeks allotted. Knowing that the trainings were required, and that employees had mixed feelings about attending, I started each session by introducing myself, and showing them a Dilbert cartoon. The cartoon pokes fun at mandatory ethics training and talks about how the trainings are “mostly common-sense” anyway. After viewing the comic I explained what we would be doing in 90 minutes and then used clicker polling to find out how employees felt about being at the training. The first clicker question asked them to rate how they felt about attending ethics training and the second clicker question asked them if they had been honest about their response to the previous question. This helped set a playful tone and one that showed an understanding of attitudes regarding mandatory training. These early clicker questions allowed me to demonstrate how anonymous clicker polling worked and that it was OK to not want to be present at the training. However, 69% of the employees and 80% of the supervisors demonstrated through clicker responses that although they were required to come to the training, it wasn't so bad and they usually learned something. This predominant attitude made it easier to proceed with the training. Employees indicated that they liked the use of anonymous clicker polling for ethics training.

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After the introduction, I presented the results from the Fall 2011 quantitative research study. A sample of the City of Bozeman employees had participated in the on-line survey, another sample had declined to participate, and none had received the research results directly. Although not much discussion was generated by the research results, employees indicated that they were pleased to hear the results and gain an understanding of the study implications.

Next, a series of ethics “Red Light/Green Light” questions were asked. These consisted of short scenarios that presented potential ethical dilemmas. If there was a potential ethical issue present, participants selected a button that reflected a “red light” response. If the participant thought that the scenario did not reflect an ethical concern, they pushed a “green light” response. There were 5 of these questions in the training (the questions were adapted for the perspective of an employee or a supervisor depending on the training). After each “Red Light/Green Light” question, and large group discussion, the corresponding ethics code was highlighted. The intent of these questions was to serve as a warm up, to generate critical thinking, and to provide a connection to the City of Bozeman code of ethics.

The next portion of the training consisted of more in-depth ethical scenarios. A slide with an ethical situation was projected and read to the large group. One to 3 anonymous clicker response questions were generated, and then small groups were formed to discuss the ethical situation. The small groups were given 3-5 minutes to discuss the situation and how they would respond to it. Due to the noise level of the small group discussions, and the engagement of employees in these discussions, a small cow bell was utilized to re-gain attention to the front of the room to facilitate a summary discussion about the specific scenario. Employees and supervisors appeared to appreciate the opportunity for discussion and to apply critical thinking skills to these ethical scenarios. The scenario discussions were included in the training to

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promote involving others in ethical dilemmas and to demonstrate that a variety of opinions can lead to different perspectives and more informed ethical decision-making. Employees got to discuss what the right thing to do might be in the situation. Two or 3 of these longer scenarios were utilized in each training session, depending on the time available. Again, a large group discussion was facilitated after each small group discussion, and the relevant code was attached to the particular scenario.

The final part of the training session involved the 4 research questions. Employees and supervisors formed small groups and responded to each of the research questions. Responses were put onto a flip chart page (or pages) and the small group selected a spokesperson who reported back to the large group what they talked about. I took observational field notes during the report out by small groups and asked clarifying questions for greater understanding.

At the close of each training session, two clicker evaluation slides were utilized for feedback (Likert scale response items: this training session was a good use of my time, and I learned something today that I will use in my work with the City).

Back in the Local Government Center office, I transcribed the flip chart notes to a word document by research question. The observational field notes were utilized to check for consistency and to provide quotations of what people actually said. Results were organized by patterns and themes.

A representation of the frequencies of emerging themes can be found in Table 1, demonstrating responses from employees and supervisors separately by research question. Numbers to the right of each bullet represent frequencies. The number to the left of the slash represents the number of small groups who discussed the theme. The number to the right

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represents the total number of small groups who discussed the theme. There was redundancy in the emerging themes among the research questions. I chose which research question to assign the theme, to make sense of the data and to avoid repeating information. This was not a perfect process and overlap does occur. I did not include categories in the chart if they emerged only once. My goal was to find patterns in the data rather than anecdotes representing just a few people (Trevino et al., 2003). However, I will give the entire list of comments to the City of Bozeman at the close of this study.

Table 1. Responses to research questions by category

Question	Employees	Supervisors
Q1: Talk about how your group perceives the ethics “culture” within the City of Bozeman. Is it weak, strong, or somewhere in between. Why?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong 6/38</li> <li>• Strong culture on the departmental level 7/38</li> <li>• In between weak and strong 16/38</li> <li>• Weak 6/38</li> <li>• Weak for administration 4/38</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong 6/12</li> <li>• Moving in a positive direction 3/12</li> <li>• In between weak and strong 3/12</li> <li>• Strong within our department 2/12</li> </ul>
Q2: What steps would you take to strengthen ethical behavior within the City of Bozeman?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accountability 18/38 Hold people accountable at all levels, tie ethics to evaluation</li> <li>• Communication and transparency 16/38 Improved communications and transparency</li> <li>• Training 14/38 Continue education, trainings and discussion</li> <li>• Hire and promote ethical people 6/38</li> <li>• Create anonymous avenues to report ethical violations 6/38</li> <li>• Increase pay, implement recommendations from compensation study 3/38</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Training 5/12 Continue education, trainings and discussion</li> <li>• Realistic Policies 4/12 Ethics policies more realistic, more guidance and clarity in the gray areas</li> <li>• Accountability 3/12 Hold employees more accountable</li> <li>• Pro-active 2/12 Be pro-active and not reactive to ethics issues</li> </ul>

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<p>Q3: What do you think the role of City Leadership should be in strengthening the ethical culture? (Employee Question)  <b>OR</b> As a supervisor and leader within the City, what role do you serve or should you serve in creating the ethical culture of the City? How can the City Leadership assist in creating a stronger culture? (Supervisor Question)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lead by example; be a good role model for staff 26/38</li> <li>• Safe environment 10/38 Create and reward a culture where questions are invited and asked freely, in a retaliation-free environment</li> <li>• Bridge the gap between management and employees 10/38</li> <li>• City Leaders are ethics experts 2/38</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lead by example; be a good role model for staff 11/12</li> </ul>
<p>Q4: As a City employee, what do you want out of the Ethics Policy, Board of Ethics and the Ethics Trainings?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear guidelines 22/38 clarity for behavior, gray areas, gifts</li> <li>• Training Design 21/38 Variety in what employees want, like scenarios and discussion, like clickers, like meeting staff from other departments</li> <li>• Board of Ethics 21/38 Introductions, visibility, access, communication</li> <li>• Legal Guidance 9/38 Available, visible, clear, common-sense</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Training Design 7/12 Specific scenarios within departments, like scenarios and discussions</li> <li>• Clear guidelines 6/12 Clear expectations from the City, guidance in gray areas, clarity on gifts</li> </ul>

\* Numbers to the right of each bullet represent frequencies. The number to the left of the slash represents the number of small groups who mentioned the response theme to this item. The number to the right represents the total number of small groups who discussed the item. There were 3 supervisor training sessions with a total of 12 small groups for discussion. There were 10 employee training sessions with a total of 38 small groups for discussion. Small groups consisted of 3-10 individuals.

Research Question 1: How do two groups of municipal employees (supervisory and non-supervisory) perceive the strength of the ethical culture in their municipality (weak – medium – strong)?

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Employees rated the ethical culture in their municipality across the whole continuum from weak to strong. Employee groups mentioned that weak, strong, and in-between cultures are all present, depending on where you work within the City. Several employees noted that there are different ethical cultures within the same department, even varying by shifts. Most employees felt that their own department had a strong culture and that it was their perception of other departments or managers that led them to rate the overall culture as weaker. The following quotes are a representative sample from the employee trainings.

*“We are a house divided in terms of ethical culture.” Management versus the rank and file. We see administration as weak, where each of us rated our departments as strong.”*

*“Mid-management does not want to deal with negative situations in the department. Rather than welcoming questions and dealing with conflict, there is no resolution.”*

*“There will always be some offenders, but we are doing well in a relative way.”*

*“The ethics program is in place and reinforced. City employees tend to be ethical in general and self-regulating. We now have an Ethics Handbook and ethical standards. There is a perception that the culture is progressing to better.”*

There is a difference in how the ethical culture of the City is viewed by non-supervisory employees and supervisors. Supervisors rated the ethical culture stronger. There were no small groups of supervisors who rated the culture as weak, although some rated it in between weak and strong.

*“We see the culture as strong. The City is being proactive, as opposed to reactive. We have had no recent complaints.”*

*“I’ve been here since we started the ethics trainings. I would say that we have moved from a 5 to an 8 on a scale of 1-10. We are more focused on ethics now, we talk about it more.”*

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Research Question 2: What steps do two groups of municipal employees (supervisory and non-supervisory) believe their municipality should take to strengthen the ethical culture?

In relation to research question 2, both employees and supervisors identified accountability and training as ways to strengthen ethical behavior within the City of Bozeman. Eighteen small groups of employees talked about accountability, *“Hold people accountable on all levels. Follow through on disciplinary action. Discuss ethics in performance evaluations.”* They discussed the need to *“use positive reinforcement and recognize ethical behavior when we see it,”* as well as *“evaluate ethics in each department.”* Three of the supervisor small groups also mentioned accountability with similar comments.

Training, although mandated, is seen by both groups as an important component in reinforcing the Code of Ethics and ethical behavior. Both employees and supervisors discussed continuing education, continued training, and continued discussion among employees within departments. Both groups mentioned that the scenarios and discussions helped to determine the right thing to do, rather than just reciting the Code and what the Codes says about what not to do. A need to promote more conversations about ethics, day-to-day and on the job, was noted by both groups. The trainings *“seem to be opening discussion”* and moving ethics *“beyond a once-a-year mandated training topic.”*

Employees had additional suggestions for steps to increase ethical behavior. The employee groups were vocal about improving communication from managers and supervisors and transparency in decision-making. *“We would like more interdepartmental communications, nothing hidden. How do decisions get made?”* Also, *“we would like to hear our leaders talk*

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*more about ethics and tell us about changes and updates.*” One group suggested that employees have the opportunity to attend management meetings, so they can learn how decisions are made.

Employees also suggested that the City put a stronger effort into ethics at the time of hire. *“If we hire ethical people, we will be an ethical organization. People come with their ethics already developed.”* Similar emphasis was placed on promoting people who have demonstrated ethical behavior. *“We would like to see a stronger correlation between promotions/raises and ethical decision-making. Hire quality leaders.”*

Six small groups of employees discussed anonymous avenues for reporting ethical violations. They talked about making it easier to report, safer to report, and ways to get advice anonymously. On-line forums, website reporting, and a hot line were all suggested.

Finally, employees mentioned pay as an ethical issue. *“We think that pay is an ethical issue – it relates to how we feel we are valued and how people value our ability to make decisions. Top administration received raises in this time, while the rank and file did not.”*

Supervisors identified two steps to strengthen ethical behavior that were different than the employees. Supervisors discussed the need for realistic policies that *“provide more clarity and guidance in the gray areas.”* They also discussed a pro-active approach to ethics (including training, education and discussion), rather than a reactive approach relating to an ethical crisis that is taking place. They noted the need to weave ethics into everyday work situations to assist in a pro-active approach; *“Think about ethical situations and what the right thing to do is, before we are on the other side of it having to clean up the mess.”*

Research Question 3: What role should City leadership play in strengthening the ethical culture?

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The overwhelming response to research question 3 was “*to lead by example.*” Out of 50 total small groups (employees and supervisors), 37 small groups led with this bullet point. There was less agreement about how to recognize or teach “*leading by example,*” but it was strongly emphasized that leaders should “*talk the talk, and walk the walk.*” Employees stated, “*City leaders need to set a high bar, follow the ethics standards themselves, and foster an ethical and transparent culture.*” Also, “*We want them to set the tone for ethics and model the behavior they want to see in everyone else.*” Depending on the department, employees voiced that their supervisors and managers were doing this well, or not doing this well. There were both negative and positive statements made about managers and supervisors leading by example and serving as positive role models for staff.

Supervisors had some insight into leading by example but added that specific training or feedback in this area would be helpful. Supervisors discussed that they need to create an open door environment, provide their perceptions of ethical issues, and initiate discussions with employees about ethics within their work area.

Apart from leading by example and role modeling ethical behavior, employees identified the need for a safe environment without retaliation, bridging the gap between management and employees, and the need for City leaders to be ethics experts.

Regarding a safe environment: “*We need to create and reward a culture where questions are invited and asked freely – make it safe.*” And, “*There is a reluctance now to bring things forward or to talk freely. Make it safe to go to leadership.*” Also, “*We would like a retaliation-free environment; if you confront your supervisor or manager, there won’t be repercussions.*”

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Supervisors are also impacted by this perceived lack of safe environment. They stated, *“The fear of retaliation affects us too. When there is a reluctance to come to management to share concerns, ask questions, or report an unsafe behavior, supervisors can’t act on information they don’t have. A safe, open environment is needed for all of us – the fear doesn’t serve any of us.”* Whether the environment is safe to openly question how decisions are made or bring concerns to the open, there does appear to be a perception that it is not safe to do so in some City departments.

Employees talked about a perceived distance between management and employees. They expressed a desire to know the City leaders better. They want more communication, access to managers, and visibility. One group invited the City managers to *“come work side by side us on a crew for 8 hours a day for two weeks. Help with snow removal, graffiti removal, flushing, and garbage.”* One employee noted, *“When Tricia was hired as the new Human Resources Director, she came around to every department to introduce herself to employees. We have not met several of the City Management or the Board of Ethics. I liked the way Tricia did that.”*

The employees want consistency in decisions, everyone held to the same standards, two-way communication and 360 degree evaluation.

Research Question 4: What do City employees want out of the Ethics Policy, Board of Ethics and the Ethics Trainings?

Both supervisors and employees identified that they want clear guidelines from the ethics program. Although a large part of the training this year revolved around the gray areas in ethics, City employees want clarity where it can be defined (gifts as an example). They want realistic policies that are easy to understand.

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There was a lot of input into training design as well. Staff like mixing up the trainings (in person, electronic), mixing departments (department specific versus departments interacting with each other), they like clickers, scenarios and discussion.

Employees also identified that they would like introductions to the independent Board of Ethics. They would like the Board to be accessible, more visible, and to communicate with them. Employees felt they would be reluctant to involve strangers in an ethical dilemma. They would like to know more about how the Board of Ethics could be a resource to them.

Employees want the same access, visibility, and communication with the City legal department.

### **Conclusions and Discussion**

The employees of the City of Bozeman were a true pleasure to work with on these 2012 ethics trainings. Although mandated to annual training by City charter, the employees arrived with good attitudes, engaged with the material, and generated legitimate recommendations for strengthening the ethical culture and climate within the City. It has been a privilege to work with the City of Bozeman in this capacity. There were common themes among the supervisors and non-supervisory employees, along with different perspectives depending on group membership. Many of the suggestions made by employees are supported by ethics research.

Utilizing the concept map from Figure 1 discussed earlier in this study, the conclusions are organized in three areas that impact the ethical strength of an organization: ethics culture/climate, ethical leadership, and ethics program. These components interact with each other and collectively to impact ethical behavior within the municipal organization.

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Strengthening the ethics culture: Accountability, training, open communications, transparency

The City of Bozeman ethical culture was rated by employees and supervisors as being a strong-leaning culture. Although rated along the full continuum of weak, strong, and in between weak and strong, the overall rating reflects leaning towards strong. In almost all cases, employees rated their own departments as strong or improving. The City management was rated as weak by some employees and there is a perceived distance from the “rank and file” employees to the management level.

Bozeman employees and supervisors identify accountability and training as steps to strengthen ethical behavior. Ethical leaders create ground rules and hold employees accountable (Trevino et al., 2003). Accountability is linked with the reinforcement of ethical behavior. Reinforcement refers to the likelihood that employees will be punished for behaving unethically and rewarded for behaving ethically (Kaptein, 2011). When employees are not punished for unethical behavior or even rewarded for such behavior, the message is that unethical behavior is acceptable or even desirable. The reward system represents a key symbol system that creates shared meaning about appropriate and inappropriate conduct (Trevino et al., 2003). Through the reward system, the leader focuses attention on the kinds of behaviors that are valued and not valued in the organization. A lack of recognition of ethical behavior reduces the willingness of employees to act ethically and increases the likelihood of unethical behavior. In alignment with this research, Bozeman employees voiced that they want employees at all levels held accountable for positive and negative behavior.

Organization-wide communications and transparency will also lead to a stronger ethical culture. Trevino et al. (2003) demonstrated the importance of conveying an ethics message.

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Leaders need to appear courageous in tough ethical situations, and be concerned about means, not just ends. They need to think about the long term. Some leaders believe that their ethics are quite transparent to others. But, to distant employees (Trevino et al., 2003), the “fishbowl” may look more like a “fortress,” that blocks wide-spread communication. When leaders share information about important organizational decisions, they are viewed as more ethical. Ethical leaders can demonstrate that they care about employees within an organization in a variety of ways: listening, demonstrating concern for the greater good, and the long-term best interest of the organization. They need to communicate regularly about ethical issues, and hold people accountable through rewards and punishment to signal support for ethical values.

Bozeman employees want the City to build ethics into everyday tasks, and especially to hiring, promotion, and performance evaluation. Employees want an anonymous way to alert the City to potential ethical violations. Current pay was also tied to ethics. A pro-active approach, including realistic policies, annual training and interactive discussions, will help the City avoid ethics crises.

Ethical Leadership: Leading by example, safe environment, bridging the gap

Bozeman employees want their leaders to lead by example and model the behavior they want to see in others. People learn what behavior is expected of them by observing the behavior of role models (Kaptein, 2011). Ethical standards are compromised when managers and supervisors communicate contradictory or inconsistent signals to subordinates. Behavior that is consistent with the ethical standards of the organization reinforces the message of compliance with these standards. Executives set the tone at the top that shapes the ethical culture and climate for the organization. Ethical leaders reinforce conduct within the context of an ethics

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agenda. Employees perceive that the ethical leader's goal is not simply job performance, but performance within a set of ethical values and principles (Trevino et al., 2003). Trevino et al. noted that an organization whose leaders represent high ethical standards and who reward ethical conduct is also an organization that values its employees, its community, and obeying the law. Leading by example was a strong theme with Bozeman employees.

Bozeman employees want a safe, retaliation-free culture where questions can be asked openly from any level. A relevant dimension of ethical culture to predict and prevent unethical behavior is that of the openness managers and employees experience to discuss ethical dilemmas and alleged unethical behavior (Kaptein 2011). If the organizational culture is characterized by little discussion where criticism is not encouraged or accepted, ideas will not be exchanged and the readiness to bring ethical issues to the attention of management will be limited or absent. Trevino et al. (1999) noted that the degree to which managers and employees can openly talk about ethics is a good predictor of the frequency of unethical behavior.

Bozeman employees perceive a gap between management and the front line. They want their managers to be accessible, communicative, and visible. Kaptein (2011) found cases where a lack of visibility was a frontrunner to unethical behavior. A lack of visibility can lead to concealed behavior. Further, Trevino et al. (2003) discusses social salience for leaders. If a leader is quietly ethical within the confines of the top management team, but more distant employees do not know about it, he or she is not likely to be perceived as an ethical leader. More distant employees are not likely to infer ethical leadership from routine executive decisions that are not widely communicated. One small group of Bozeman employees stated, "*We perceive that unethical decisions have been made.*" In the same session, another small group reported that they wanted the City managers to "*foster an ethical and transparent environment.*"

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Bozeman employees want to see and experience strong leadership. They want to be confident that leaders will know what to do and will take action on issues that arise (ethics experts).

One group of Bozeman employees stated, “*We are one of the best cities in Montana – and it is because of us staff – we want to feel valued.*” Others noted that “*department heads are valued over the workers. We want equality across the board, more respect for workers.*”

Employees want the City to avoid an elitist mentality.

Ethics Program: Training, discussion, clarity, visible leadership

Bozeman employees “*want to feel like we are working for an ethical government.*” They want “*guidance, leadership, and clarity.*” Employees had suggestions for training design which include a variety of approaches (in-person and electronic). They appreciate the increased depth into ethical scenarios. Rather than focusing on Codes of Ethics alone, the use of clickers, ethics scenarios and interactive discussions helped to deepen knowledge. City employees would like access, visibility and communications with City leaders, the independent Board of Ethics, and the City legal department. They want clarity and realistic guidelines, where possible. An employee reported, “*I’d like clarity on the behavioral ethical questions that exist. What is the clear right thing to do in this situation?*” It is important that an organization does not leave managers and employees to rely on their moral intuition and good judgment alone, but to create a culture in which a distinction between ethical and unethical behavior is clear (Kaptein, 2011). Greater clarity communicates the importance of ethical standards and decreases the likelihood that employees unwittingly engage in unethical behavior.

Kaptein (2011) demonstrated that dimensions of ethical culture are negatively related to unethical behavior. Ethical role modeling by managers and supervisors, an openness to discuss

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ethical issues, and reinforcement of ethical behavior were all suggestions made by City of Bozeman employees in this qualitative study and are consistent with the factors identified as significant in Kaptein's 2011 research. West & Berman (2006) write about a comprehensive ethics system. Many organizations do more than just adopt codes of ethics; their leaders provide examples of ethical conduct and foster discussions of ethics issues, cities offer ethics trainings that deal with relevant scenarios, some local governments make ethics a criterion in hiring, where others have an ethics counselor to whom employees can go when they have questions. West & Berman (2006) assert that leaders must take inventory of their organization's ethics environment. The City of Bozeman has begun this journey. Employees noted, "*We are moving in a positive direction. The culture has become more open, it's better than in years past.*" What Bozeman learns through the process may set the stage for strengthening the ethics of other municipalities.

### **Recommendations**

- For leaders of municipal governments – as a result of the informal survey of municipal clerks reflecting that 75% of Montana municipalities do not give new employees a copy of the Montana State Code of Ethics, and 93% provide no training on the Montana State Code of Ethics, the ethics program case-study of the City of Bozeman may provide a good example to strengthen ethical leadership and ethical culture within cities and towns across Montana.
- For the City of Bozeman leadership – this qualitative study has highlighted employee-identified areas to strengthen ethical culture within the City (that are in alignment with ethics research). City leaders may use this study to address the conclusions in each of

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three areas; ethical culture/climate, ethical leadership, and ethics program. Specific recommendations include:

- Continue training, education, and foster discussion of ethics issues: incorporate it beyond a one-time annual training. Utilize relevant scenarios that apply to specific municipal work settings.
  - Make ethics a criterion in hiring, promotion, and performance evaluation.
  - Reinforce ethical behavior - recognize and reward ethical behavior; follow through on disciplinary actions related to unethical behavior.
  - Cultivate an openness to discuss ethical issues - address the perception of an unsafe environment for questions, discussions, and reporting.
  - Clearly identify ethics resource personnel available to employees.
  - Consider anonymous avenues for reporting.
  - Ethical role modeling – lead by example, enhanced communications, perception of distance.
  - Board of Ethics – introductions and communications with employees. Provide clarity on the gift prohibition.
- For further study:
    - The 2011 pilot quantitative study, along with this 2012 qualitative study, provide additional areas of focus for the City of Bozeman to continue to strengthen ethics within the organization. Future research should be conducted after implementation of these recommendations to determine if there has been a strengthening of the ethical environment within the City. The City of Bozeman

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has embarked down a unique path in the State of Montana. What is being learned within the City may be very valuable and replicable to other Montana municipalities in the future.

- More research is needed on ethics training, especially from the trainee's perspective. Was the material covered relevant to their jobs? Were the tools useful in resolving day-to-day ethical dilemmas? Was the mode of instruction sufficiently engaging to capture their interest? Was the time allocated appropriate? And finally, is training associated with a more ethical organization? (West & Berman, 2006).

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