

“ETHICS IN ACTION: EVERYDAY USE, IS IT TOO MUCH FOR THE PUBLIC SECTOR?”

7th Special Edition: National Public Sector Non-Compliance Audit Symposium

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About the Facilitator

Siyanda is a seasoned research management professional with over **15 years' experience** in higher education. He is currently the **Manager of Research Ethics and Integrity at the University of Zululand**, where he oversees **HREC and AREC** operations, ensuring regulatory compliance and addressing research misconduct. His expertise includes **research ethics management, policy development, postgraduate studies administration, and research outputs review**, with previous roles at **UKZN and Rhodes University**. Siyanda is the **founder and chairperson** of the Eastern Region **Community of Practice for Research Ethics and Integrity**, launched through **SARIMA** in 2020. He serves as an **editor of the Journal of Research Management & Administration (JoRMA)** hosted by Coventry University (UK) and is a recipient of the **DSI/SARIMA Professional Excellence Award in Research Management (2021)**. He is also internationally accredited as a **Research Management Professional (RMP)** by the **IPRC (2023–2028)**. Siyanda holds a **Master's degree in Higher Education from Rhodes University**, with research focused on ethical clearance processes. He has delivered numerous **research ethics training sessions, seminars, and webinars**, and has contributed to **policy reviews** across South African higher education and government institutions.



OBJECTIVES

- Ethical Culture,
- Institutional Behaviour,
- Integrity Leadership,
- And Practical Ethics

INTRODUCTION

“Why do institutions with the most policies still experience persistent non-compliance?”

- Policies alone do not create ethical institutions
- Compliance without integrity becomes performative
- Ethical culture determines institutional behaviour

Many institutions today have:

- extensive policies,
- codes of conduct,
- compliance frameworks,
- audit systems,
- governance committees.

A THOUGHT

“Non-compliance is rarely caused by lack of policies. It is usually caused by organisational culture, ethical disengagement, weak accountability, and the normalisation of misconduct.”

Ethics in the Public Sector

Public Sector Ethical Pressures include:

- Political influence
- Procurement risks
- Resource constraints
- Weak accountability cultures
- Fear-based compliance
- Ethics fatigue
- Public trust erosion

But ethics should operate daily — especially when nobody is watching.

COMPLAINT VS INTEGRITY

Leading with Compliance vs. Integrity

- Integrity is ingrained in a person's entire being—not just exhibited in the way they act around other people. It's part of a bigger culture and mindset around doing the right thing.
- Compliance doesn't bring an ingrained sense of right and wrong. Instead, it suggests rules and guidelines for how a person should act around others, not how they should actually *be* as a person. Compliance is not just signing a statement saying "you and other employees have read and understood a policy, BUT requires actually absorbing the organization's values and taking them to heart.

Compliance vs Integrity

- a) Compliance asks: “Did you follow the rule?”
 - b) Integrity asks: “Did you do the right thing even when unobserved? Are you intentional about doing the right thing?”
- tick-box governance,
 - ethics fatigue,
 - policy overload,
 - fear-driven compliance,
 - institutional silence,
 - and ethical blind spots.

Compliance vs. Integrity

| Compliance | Integrity |
|----------------------|-------------------------|
| Rule-focused | Values-focused |
| External enforcement | Internal accountability |
| “What is allowed?” | “What is right?” |
| Audit-driven | Culture-driven |
| Minimal standards | Ethical commitment |

Adapted from principles in the Ethics & Compliance Handbook, The Ethics Institute.

The Problem with Tick-Box Ethics

Symptoms of Tick-Box Ethics:

- Policies no one reads
- Ethics training treated as a formality
- Compliance activated only during audits
- Ethical silence in teams
- Fear of reporting misconduct
- Leadership inconsistency

Many institutions unintentionally create “tick-box ethics”. This happens when ethics becomes:

- procedural,
- symbolic,
- or administrative.

People complete forms, attend workshops, sign declarations — but unethical conduct continues beneath the surface.

Why Good Institutions Drift into Non-Compliance?

Drivers of Ethical Drift:

- Normalisation of shortcuts
- Weak consequence management
- Poor ethical leadership
- Organisational silence
- Conflicts of interest
- Pressure to meet targets

Non-compliance rarely begins as major corruption. It often begins with:

- tolerated shortcuts,
- ignored minor violations,
- selective accountability,
- and silence.

Over time, unethical behaviour becomes normalised. This is what ethics scholars refer to as “ethical drift.”

Participation alone does not equal ethical community engagement.

Example of non-compliance in Higher Education

Observing similar patterns in higher education:

- bypassing ethics approval processes,
- undisclosed conflicts of interest,
- plagiarism, falsification of data presentation
- Artificial Intelligence (AI) Use
- procurement irregularities,
- manipulation of reporting systems.

The institutional context may differ, but the ethical dynamics remain the same.

Example of non-compliance in use of AI

STAATSKOERANT, 10 APRIL 2026

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GENERAL NOTICES • ALGEMENE KENNISGEWINGS

DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATIONS AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES

NOTICE 3880 OF 2026

DRAFT SOUTH AFRICA NATIONAL ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) POLICY

The Minister of Communications and Digital Technologies, hereby publishes, in accordance with section 85 (2) (b) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, the Draft South Africa National Artificial Intelligence (AI) Policy that was approved by Cabinet on 25 March 2026 (combined with the Special Sitting of Cabinet on 01 April 2026), for public comment.

Members of the public and interested persons are invited to submit their comments / inputs / written representations on this Draft Policy, within sixty (60) days of the date of publication of this notice, final day being 10 June 2026, 16h00 at the latest. Late submissions may not be considered.

All written comments and enquiries on this publication should be directed to:

Example of non-compliance in use of AI

Article: Dr. Thethiwe Nomalanga Mashinini is a Senior Lecturer in Cyber Law at the School of Law, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg,

Lessons from SA's AI policy based on fake research

4 May 2026 - Nomalanga Mashinini

The incident is being treated as an embarrassment. It's something more serious: a failure of the very standards the revised policy must uphold.

South Africa's first attempt to establish a binding artificial intelligence (AI) policy framework came to an abrupt halt just 16 days after it was officially gazetted.

On 10 April, the Department of Communications and Digital Technologies published the [Draft South Africa National Artificial Intelligence Policy](#) for public comment.

Journalists checked the references and [found](#) that they contained fabrications. These fell into two categories: academic journals that do not exist; and real journals in which the referenced research articles were never published.

Example of non-compliance in use of AI

According to Dr Nomalanga Mashinini's article :

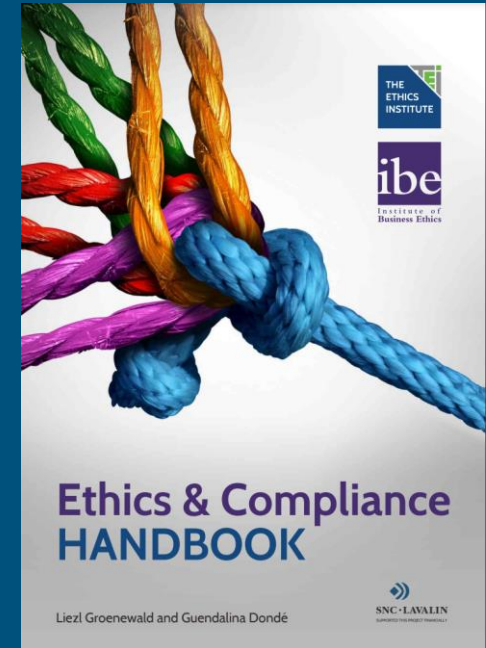
Such fabrications are typical of a known generative AI problem called hallucination. Withdrawing the draft, the communications minister was frank: the problem was not a technical glitch but a failure of oversight. Generative AI was used without proper human verification of the sources, compromising the credibility and integrity of the document. Much of the public commentary has treated this as an embarrassment: the policy meant to govern AI was itself undermined by AI.

The hallucinated citations reveal two specific failures. Epistemic integrity (the assurance that research has been conducted through reliable, ethical and repeatable methods that any reader could verify) was absent. So was information integrity (the public's reasonable expectation that information from an authoritative source can be trusted).

Ethical Culture and Institutional Trust

Ethical Culture Influences:

- Decision-making
- Reporting behaviour
- Accountability
- Public confidence
- Governance effectiveness
- Audit outcomes



Adapted from the Ethics & Compliance Handbook, The Ethics Institute.

Ethical Culture and Institutional Trust Cont...

Audit findings are often symptoms of deeper cultural problems. Where ethical culture is weak:

- reporting decreases,
- accountability weakens,
- trust collapses,
- and misconduct becomes easier to conceal.

Ethical culture is therefore not a “soft issue.”

- It directly affects:
- governance quality,
- compliance outcomes,
- and public trust.



ETHICAL LEADERSHIP

Ethical Leadership Matters

- Model accountability
- Create psychological safety
- Encourage ethical dialogue
- Apply standards consistently
- Lead beyond compliance

Institutions take ethical direction from leadership behaviour. Employees observe:

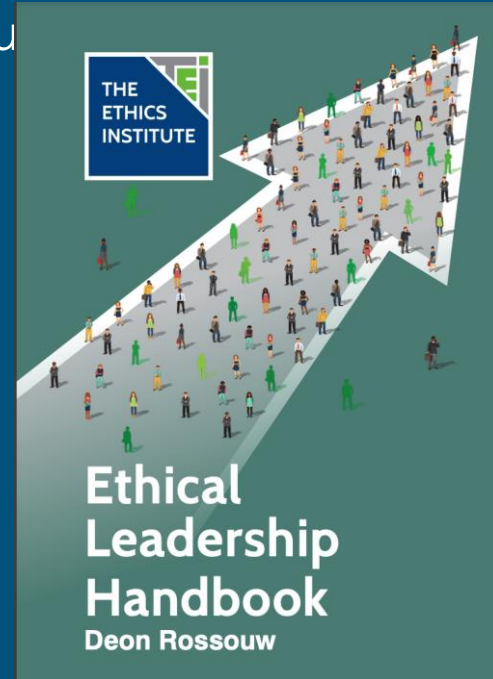
- what leaders tolerate,
- what leaders ignore,
- and what leaders reward.

Adapted from the Ethical Leadership Handbook, The Ethics Institute.

Ethical Leadership Matters Cont...

Ethical leadership is not about speeches BUT It is about

- consistency,
- fairness,
- transparency,
- and accountability under pressure.



Adapted from the Ethical Leadership Handbook, The Ethics Institute.

Leadership Failures That Enable Misconduct

- Selective accountability
- Silence during misconduct
- Retaliation against whistleblowers or failure to protect whistleblowers
- Inconsistent enforcement
- Ethical double standards

One unethical leader can damage an entire governance system and that when employees quickly learn whether ethics is:

- genuinely valued,
- or merely communicated for appearances.

NOTE : Where there is inconsistency, trust disappears AND where trust disappears, misconduct increases.

CODES OF ETHICS

Are Codes of Ethics Enough?

“A code of ethics cannot replace ethical behaviour.”

- Codes guide behaviour
- Codes cannot enforce character
- Ethical culture operationalises the code
- Leadership gives codes credibility

Adapted from the Codes of Ethics Handbook, The Ethics Institute.

Most institutions already have codes of ethics BUT the real question is:

- Are these codes lived daily?

A code becomes meaningful only when:

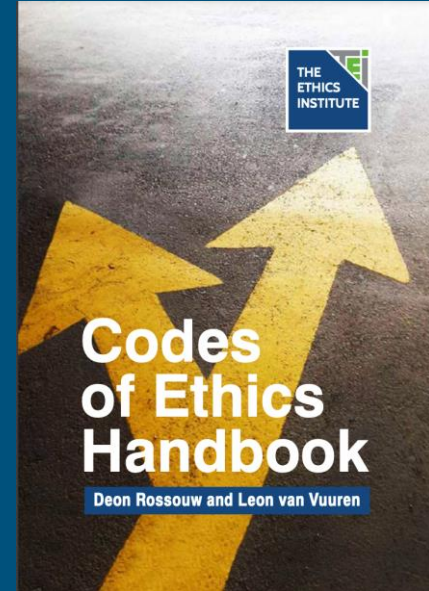
- leadership embodies it,
- systems reinforce it,
- and employees trust its application.

Otherwise, it becomes another compliance document.

Making Ethics Operational

Ethics Must Be:

- Discussed regularly
- Embedded in decisions
- Linked to performance
- Supported by leadership
- Safe to report
- Reinforced consistently



NOTE : Ethics must become operational, Not occasional, Not ceremonial, Not activated only during audits BUT be influential in the full operations of the organization

ETHICS IN ACTION FRAMEWORK

5 Pillars of Institutional Integrity

1. Ethical Leadership
2. Accountability Systems
3. Speak-Up Culture
4. Ethical Literacy
5. Consistent Consequence Management

If institutions want sustainable ethical governance, ethics must be institutionalized. These five pillars help move ethics from theory into practice.

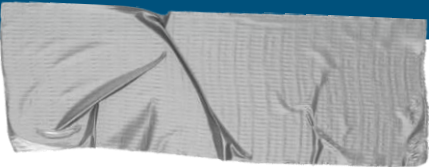
Moving Beyond Fear-Based Compliance

Sustainable Integrity Requires:

- Trust
- Transparency
- Consistency
- Ethical courage
- Institutional accountability

Fear may temporarily improve compliance but sustainable ethical governance requires trust. People must believe:

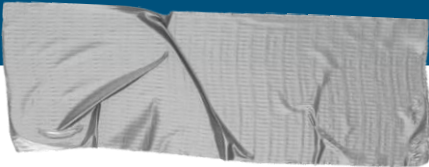
- misconduct will be addressed fairly,
- ethical behaviour matters,
- and integrity is rewarded — not punished.



Audits can detect non-compliance.
But only ethical institutional
cultures can prevent its
recurrence.”

REFLECTION

- Compliance systems are necessary.
- Audits are necessary.
- Policies are necessary.



But institutional integrity ultimately
depends on people:

- leaders,
- managers,
- employees,
- and organisational culture.

Ethics is not too much for the
public sector. BUT **Ethics** is what
makes sustainable public
accountability possible.

Disclaimer

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Disclosure

- Generative AI (ChatGPT) was used as a tool to support the development of learning activities and materials. All content was reviewed, adapted, and finalized by the presenter.

REFERENCES

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- The Ethics Institute. *Codes of Ethics Handbook*
- King IV Report on Corporate Governance for South Africa
- Public Service Commission Ethics Frameworks
- Batho Pele Principles