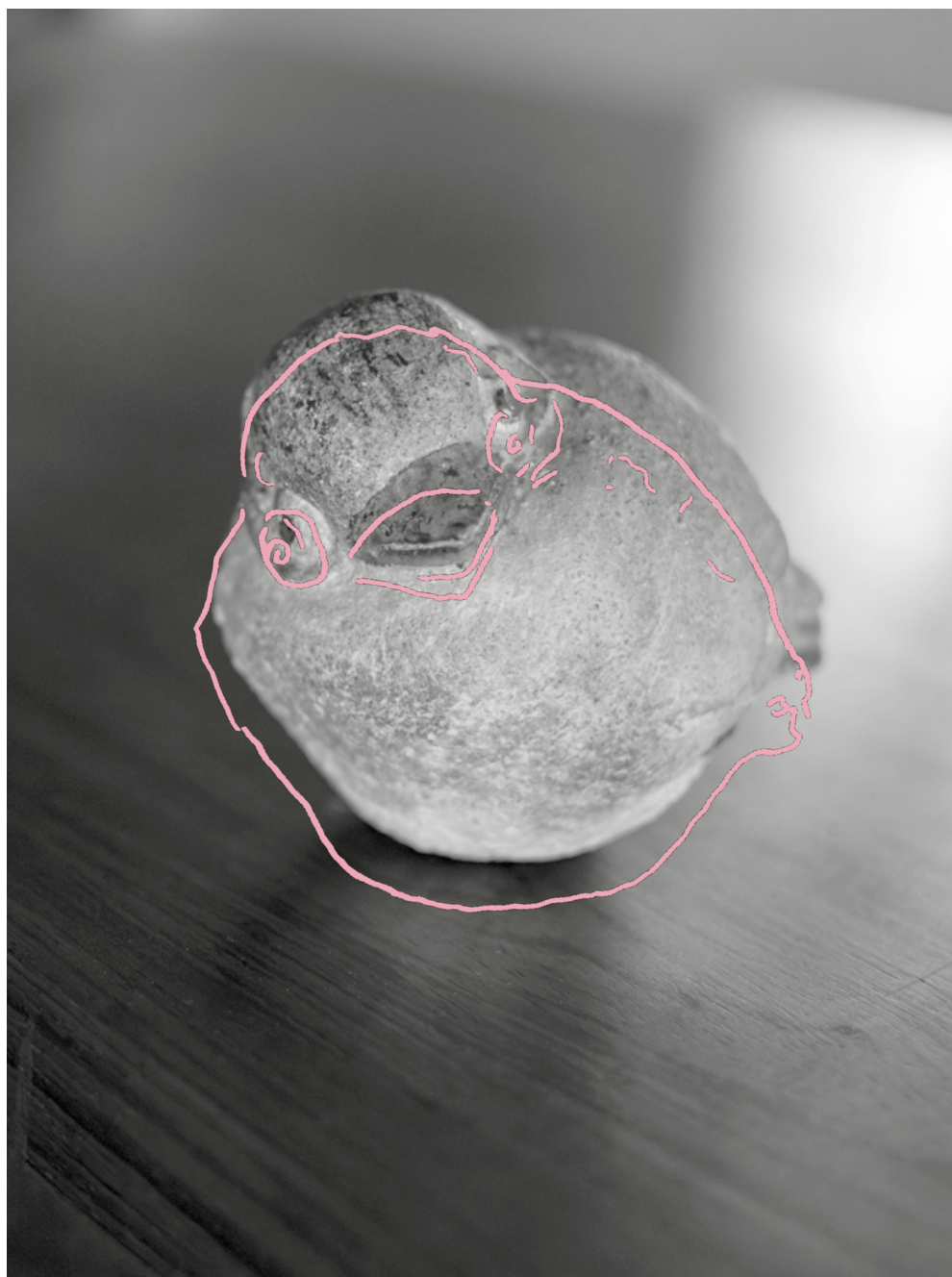


Norm-based leadership in a time of normative erosion

Elia Yi Armstrong



The Bird of Truth. The Bird of Truth by Tyra Lundgren played a special part in Dag Hammarskjöld's diplomatic engagements. It is being said that its place was on his desk, and whenever he sensed dishonesty, he would subtly rotate the bird's gaze towards his guest. Staying faithful to the UN Charter was crucial for Hammarskjöld whose commitment to its principles remains revered. In her article, Elia Yi Armstrong calls for this type of norm-based leadership and underlines the importance of the Oath of Office in safeguarding the UN's international standing and credibility amidst present-day challenges.

Elia Yi Armstrong recently retired after having served in the United Nations (UN) for about 25 years. Her last posting was as the Director of the UN Ethics Office from 2015 to 2023 and as the Director of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Ethics Office from 2008 to 2012. From 1999, she served in the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, working in public administration, including civil service reform, ethics and citizen engagement. She started her career in social services and development non-governmental organisations before joining the Canadian public service in 1993. Jobs held during this time included working at the Treasury Board Secretariat and the Privy Council Office of Canada which included a secondment to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). She holds a Bachelor of Social Work from the University of British Columbia and a Master of Science in Social Policy and Planning in Developing Countries from the London School of Economics.

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Today, the United Nations (UN) system organisations are facing complex external challenges that contribute to the questioning and erosion of norms within the international community. They are also facing internal challenges from international civil servants who are experiencing social changes. Together, these challenges confront the norm-based leadership – both by the UN itself and by the leadership within it – that is central to the work of the UN.

The international civil service is a critical part of responding to ever increasing global problems and for coalescing divergent views for norm-setting and action to tackle them. It is made up of UN staff who have made a declaration or taken an Oath of Office to ‘... exercise in all loyalty, discretion and conscience the functions entrusted to (them) as an international civil servant of the United Nations, to discharge these functions and regulate (their) conduct with the interests of the United Nations only in view, and not to seek or accept instructions in regard to the performance of (their) duties from any Government or other source external to the Organization...’¹

However, external and internal challenges call for a re-examination of effective UN leadership in a chaotic world. They also raise the question: Is the Oath of Office for UN staff as relevant today as it was in the past and will it continue to be in the future?

Externally, the world served by the UN system is currently experiencing widespread geopolitical and economic instability, armed conflict, threats to democratic governance, climate-related disasters, global health pandemics and epidemics, human rights violations, the politicisation of critical humanitarian assistance and high-stake risks stemming from new technological developments such as artificial intelligence (AI).

These crises are made more difficult to manage given the differences of views arising from the tension between self- and collective interests of Member States, that is, the exercise of national sovereignty versus the international community’s duty to intervene to protect citizens of the world.²

The proliferation of institutional interests and views, fuelled by the increasing participation of non-governmental organisations and other civil society advocacy groups, make achieving and keeping consensus more difficult. The plethora of unprecedented global problems as well as non-traditional stakeholders and interests contribute to norm-questioning. This in turn leads to normative erosion of past agreements on principles and commitments to action and makes building consensus difficult around new norms for new challenges such as AI.

UN organisations navigating this fraying normative landscape have to make difficult choices about previous international agreements at the institutional level, as well as uncertainty about emerging domains.

Unforeseen challenges

Internally, UN organisations have had to emphasise results achievement in the face of resource constraints and decentralise decision-making to be able to successfully respond to unforeseen challenges. These trends have the Organization, ie the UN, relying more on individual staff discretion than before. At the same time, international civil servants themselves are pre-occupied with new ‘personal’ versus ‘official’ boundaries that complicate norm-based leadership.

In a time of a call for greater civic engagement and the exercise of political rights, their Oath of Office requires

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staff to maintain and demonstrate their independence and impartiality in an increasingly polarised world.

For instance, recent allegations (reviewed by an independent panel and investigated by the UN Office of Internal Oversight) about a few UN Relief and Works Agency’s (UNRWA’s) staff members’ possible involvement in the 7 October 2023 attacks in Israel show the reputational and financial damage to the UN and the staff themselves that can result from taking or appearing to take sides.³

In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic brought about the necessity of increasing remote and flexible work arrangements, which may have increased work-life balance challenges, but also may have blurred the distinction between work and personal spheres for staff.

For example, flexible work arrangements place less emphasis on being at the desk and more on work deliverables. Staff members may find themselves juggling work duties while looking after their young children or elderly parents. Such a basic shift in the division of time into blocks for work versus personal life could seep into other areas such as the divide between official duties and related outside activities.

The navigation of this new social terrain by staff may challenge traditional leadership in the UN system, given the nature and volume of potential conflicts of interest that they face at the individual level.

Translating ideals into reality

The international civil service bears the responsibility for translating the ideals of the international community into reality. It is called upon to ‘serve the ideals of peace, respect for fundamental rights, economic and social progress, and international cooperation.’⁴ In fulfilling this duty, the international civil service as an institution was seen to need a new leadership paradigm.

In 2017, the UN System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) established the United Nations

System Leadership Framework (the Leadership Framework). While this framework defined a common UN leadership culture to meet the challenges of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, it is arguably even more relevant to the challenges faced in the post pandemic world today.⁵

Norm-based leadership was included among the eight defining characteristics of the Leadership Framework. *Principled, inclusive, accountable, multidimensional, transformational, collaborative* and *self-applied* make up the other seven.

The Framework establishes norm-based leadership as ‘promoting, protecting and defending United Nations norms and standards contained in international treaties, resolutions and declarations’. Defending UN Charter principles and the established precepts for the UN organ resolutions as well as hard-earned established practices of the Organisation is today’s ‘speaking truth to power’.

The Oath of Office is the cornerstone of the international civil service and norm-based leadership.

Whether faced at the institutional or individual level, making difficult choices that pits one set of undesirable outcomes against another is helped by the Oath of Office and a set of guiding principles and values. The success of norm-based leadership is the ability to get buy-in for a decision-making process through clarifying contentious issues, the potential outcomes for the affected stakeholders, and the short-term and long-term impact on the international community and the UN. It is about sticking to an unpopular decision, even if it brings about adverse consequences, at either an organisational or an individual level.

UN organisations often have broad and shifting mandates and are called upon by Member States to confront questions that sometimes simply cannot be fully resolved and lack sufficient resources to reach their goals.

Notwithstanding the many achievements of the multi-lateral institutions established following World War II, there is a persistent focus on questions regarding their performance. These questions fail to sufficiently account for the complexities arising from the multiplicity of actors and competing interests mentioned above.

The current public scepticism of all governmental and intergovernmental organisations also affects the UN system as it strives to maintain public trust. This situation of mistrust and distrust is fed further by misinformation and disinformation.

In addition to the UN Charter, international treaties and other formal reference points, UN leaders use their Oath of Office and ethical values and principles in exercising norm-based leadership. When leaders are faced with pressures, their value sets and normative beliefs can be forcefully challenged. Leaders may have to learn to understand the differences between the organisational and their own personal value sets when making highly complex, contentious and time-critical decisions. In such contexts, the Oath of Office is as important a guide today as it has been in the past for UN leaders – at all levels.

In addition, humility on the part of the leadership should make them feel more empowered to honestly admit mistakes, learn from them and give clear accounts of their decisions and actions. Humility is a complementary value to norm-based leadership.

The essence of internationalism

The founders of the UN recognised that the international civil service embodies the essence of internationalism, and the Oath of Office protects that internationalism.⁷

On 30 May 1961, former UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld detailed the legal principles for the international civil service and underscored the importance of its international character in his lecture at the University of Oxford. He warned that if these principles were

compromised, internationalism would in effect be abandoned and concluded that ‘the price to be paid may well be peace.’

The Oath of Office and norm-based leadership is needed to preserve the international character of the international civil service, both from within and without.

The UN's ability and credibility as an impartial and neutral broker in conflict situations around the world, as well as its work in development and on human rights, are central to its success. As Secretary-General Hammarskjöld remarked during the same lecture:

‘It is obvious from what I have said that the international civil servant cannot be accused of lack of neutrality simply for taking a stand on a controversial issue when this is his duty and cannot be avoided. But there remains a serious intellectual and moral problem as we move within an area inside which personal judgment must come into play. Finally, we have to deal here with a question of integrity or with, if you please, a question of conscience.’⁸

The challenges facing the global order today bear similarities to those faced during the time of Hammarskjöld's service. The Oath of Office and the Standards of conduct for the international civil service can and should guide international civil servants of today in considering the ‘question of conscience’ or personal judgment that Hammarskjöld identified more than 50 years ago.

More recently, the International Civil Service Commission (ICSC) recognised that: *‘The intention behind the standards was to reflect the overarching ideal of behaviour and conduct for an international civil service committed to serving the world for global peace and prosperity. Their ultimate purpose was to inform and inspire the staff of the organizations in the common system of articulating some basic standards that form the ethical and philosophical underpinnings of the international civil service.’⁹*

The Commission's decision in 2021 to undertake a review of the Standards 'to ensure that they continue to meet the needs of the organizations' is timely.¹⁰

The review should cover new and emerging issues facing the international civil service and examine possible new dimensions and meanings of the international civil service.

Included among them are questions about loyalty, neutrality, independence and impartiality; political participation; the use of information and communication and technology, including personal use of social media; and diversity, inclusion, and sustainable development, among many others.¹¹

International civil servants have taken an Oath of Office to exercise their functions with the interests of only the UN in view. For the international civil service to be strong enough to operate and flourish in a world of shifting crises and growing challenges, the UN leadership cannot avoid taking tough stances.

Among other defining traits of the UN System Leadership Framework, norm-based leadership will be indispensable. Will the Oath of Office remain a cornerstone for international civil servants of the future?

Realising the promise of the UN may depend on it. And norm-based leadership will be critical in safeguarding international civil servants to be able to uphold their Oath. Furthermore, leaders who exemplify the Oath will be fundamental to the Oath remaining credible and relevant for the entire international civil service, despite an increasingly challenging operating context. ■

Endnotes

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- ⁶ Ibid.
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- ¹⁰ Ibid, paragraphs 69 (a) and 67.
- ¹¹ Elia Armstrong, op. cit.