

**Can integrity be learned?
The effectiveness of integrity training programs for municipal officials**

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Paper presented at the NIG conference
(Panel 9: Good Governance as Managing Tensions Between Public Values)
Maastricht, July 25-26, 2010

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1. Introduction

In the literature, integrity training programs are often considered as a promising instrument to promote the integrity of employees of governmental (or private) organisations. Integrity training programs are assumed to enhance the moral awareness of civil servants, their ability to make moral judgements, their moral motivation and the degree of their moral behaviour (Hoekstra, Karssing & Kiebert 2002, 16-19; Bolten & Van Rossem 2005, 34-46; Sims 2002, 393-410; Jonas & Sassenberg 2006, 709-721; Falkenberg & Woiceshyn 2008, 213-217; Van Tankeren 2010, 38-39).

Despite the great popularity of integrity training programs in the public sector, the assumed positive effects of such programs are only to a limited degree supported by empirical data. Up till now little or no social science research has been conducted into the effectiveness of integrity training programs. The assumed positive effects have been hardly established in practice (Weber 1990, 183; Delaney & Sockell, 1992, 719; Menzel 1997, 224; West & Berman 2004, 189; De Groot 2007, 7).

There are also little or no empirical studies available with respect to factors that may influence the effectiveness of integrity training programs. In most publications about this subject, it is assumed that the design and contents of a program affect its effectiveness. The context in which the program is executed, is assumed to be a relevant factor as well (Ponemon 1996, 66; Trevino et al. 1999, 17; Alvarez, Salas & Garofano 2004, 389-391, Felton & Sims 2005, 384, De Groot 2007, 23; Desplaces et al. 2007, 76; Weber 2007, 65-67; Van Tankeren 2010, 36-38). Empirical evidence for these in itself plausible assumptions is however hardly available.

Against this background, from early 2009 until mid 2010, we executed an empirical research project into the effectiveness of integrity training programs and into factors that influence this effectiveness.¹ The investigation was aimed at answering the following question:

To what extent do integrity training programs yield the desired results and to what extent is their effectiveness influenced by certain features of the programs and certain characteristics of the context in which the programs are executed?

In this paper we present the most important research findings. First, we outline our theoretical framework. This framework pertains to issues such as the meaning of the concept 'integrity', the contents and design of integrity training programs and the effectiveness of this kind of training programs. It also comprises some factors that are supposed to influence the effectiveness of integrity training programs (Section 2). Subsequently, we outline the two Dutch training programs evaluated by us (Section 3). Additionally, we sketch the

¹ A comprehensive report on the research project has recently been published by Beck, Van Montfort & Twijnstra (2010). This article is based on this publication.

experimental set-up of the research project. The data gathering took place by means of a large-scale questionnaire in four Dutch municipalities at three different moments in time (Section 4). Then, we analyze the design, functioning and effectiveness of integrity training programs on the basis of the data derived from the large-scale questionnaire. In this context the effectiveness of the investigated training programs are assessed and several hypotheses about factors that are assumed to influence the effectiveness of such programs are tested (Section 5 to 7). Finally, we conclude with a clear-cut answer to our central research question. Also some recommendations are made for both scientists and practitioners (Section 8).

2. Theoretical framework

The concept of integrity. What is meant when we talk about the integrity of civil servants? A civil servant can be labelled as integer if that employee (a) is aware of the possible moral aspects that can be distinguished in a certain situation, (b) is able to judge which decision or discussions should be taken in this situation and (c) acts in accordance with the appropriate standards and rules (Huberts 2005, 9; De Groot 2007, 41; Van Tankeren 2010, 18-20; Beck, Van Montfort & Twijnstra 2010, 20). On the basis of our literature study we distinguish therefore three aspects to the term 'integrity: moral conscience, morals reason and moral actions.

Integrity training programs. To promote and guarantee the integrity of civil servants, government organisations conduct more and more an integrity policy. One of the manners to fill in that integrity policy is offering integrity training programs. *What substantive and organizational aspects are distinguished according to the literature on integrity training?* There is a wide range of conceptions and descriptions concerning the term 'integrity training program'. We defined an integrity training program as a number of mutually coherent activities which is offered by an internal or external agency to employees of an organisation in order to raise the moral conscience, the level of moral reasoning and the degree of moral actions of these employees (Beck, Van Montfort & Twijnstra 2010, 22). In this description it is referred to the three general objectives which are granted in literature often, more or less explicitly, to integrity training programs, namely (a) stimulating the moral awareness of the participants, (b) promoting their level of morals reasoning and (c) reinforcing the degree of moral actions (Van Tankeren 2010, 38-39).

Although the general aims of integrity training programs are roughly the same, the *organisational design* of a training program may vary on several points. Civil servants participate either voluntary or mandatory in a training program. Furthermore, the training program is provided by either an outsider or someone from within the own organisation. Other points on which training programs can differ are the occurrence of follow-up activities and the possibility for participants to introduce practice examples. Finally, training programs may also vary concerning the size of the groups in which the participants have been classified (Ponemon 1996; Baldwin & Magjuka 1997; Weber 2007; Van Tankeren 2010).

Not each integrity training is just as effective. *What is understood in literature under the effectiveness of integrity training programs?* An effective training program is a training program involving a high degree of goal attainment which has been completely or partially caused by the training program itself. In order to be able to determinate the degree of goal attainment, three general goals have been attributed to integrity training programs in the

research project. Such programs are aimed at increasing (a) the moral awareness of the participants, (b) their level of moral reasoning and (c) their level of moral actions.

Which factors are according to the literature of influence on the effectiveness of integrity training programs? On the basis of our literature study we have distinguished three categories of influencing factors: individual, organisational and program factors (Alvarez, Salas & Garofano 2004, 389; Beck, Van Montfort & Twijnstra 2010, 23). The first category factors pertains to *characteristics of the participant*, namely his gender, his level of education and his type of position. The second category factors relates to the *organisational context* in which the training program takes place. It concerns thereby the ethical climate, the degree of ethical leadership, the existence of a code of conduct and the knowledge of civil servants about the contents of the code of conduct. The last category factors which are in theory of influence on the effectiveness of an integrity training program, comprises *characteristics of the training*. This category concerns the same characteristics as already mentioned while describing the variety in the organisational design of training programs: the voluntariness of participation, the origin of the coach, the possibility for participants to introduce practice examples, the occurrence of follow-up meetings and the size of the group of participants . (Alvarez, Salas & Garofano 2004, 389; Beck, Van Montfort & Twijnstra 2010, 23-28).

A number of factors which are in theory of influence on the effectiveness of an integrity training, have been processed by us in several hypotheses. In each hypothesis a possible influencing factor is connected with the effectiveness of the training program.

3 The two investigated training programs

This empirical research project has focussed on two training programs. These training programs have been given the fictitious names Kwintus and Oleander. The training program Kwintus has been carried out in the Dutch municipality called Urban Commune Experiment, while the second training program Oleander was given in the so-called Rural Commune Experiment.

Training program Kwintus has been attended by most of the municipal officials from the Urban Commune Experiment. This training program lasted one day and was attended by five to fifteen municipal officials. The training program Oleander has been attended by most of the municipal officials from the Rural Commune Experiment. This training program lasted only half a day and was also attended by five to fifteen municipal officials.

Both training programs try to affiliate with the mindsets of the municipal officials. They strive to deliver personal training. In addition, both training programs aim to stimulate the moral awareness of the participants, contribute to their level of moral reasoning and give certain techniques to furnish their moral actions (Beck, Van Montfort & Twijnstra 2010, 47-50).

4 Experimental research design and large-scale questionnaires

How can the effectiveness of integrity training programs be determined by means of empirical research? We have evaluated the effectiveness of two training programs. These training programs have been given the fictitious names Kwintus and Oleander. Each of these programs was executed by another training agency. In order to measure the effectiveness of the two

training programs we have chosen for an experimental research design. In two Dutch municipalities where the selected training programs were carried out (the so-called 'experimental municipalities', which are labelled here with the fictitious names Urban Commune Experiment and Rural Commune Experiment) and two municipalities where no training programs took place (the 'control municipalities' labelled here as Urban Commune Control and Rural Commune Control) we conducted several surveys among civil servants. The questionnaires used in the surveys contained items which are operationalisations of the concept 'integrity'. By means of the questionnaires we were able to measure the three aspects of the concept 'integrity' distinguished in our theoretical framework, namely the aspects 'moral awareness', 'level of moral reasoning' and 'degree of moral actions'.

The short period effectiveness of the training programs Kwintus and Oleander has been determined by decreasing a questionnaire under the participants of the training in the experimental municipalities. This has been done at two different moments, namely immediately before the start of the training session (pretest) and shortly after the ending of the training session (posttest). The possible changes in the integrity of the people concerned, i.e. their potentially different scores on the pretest and posttest, can be attributed to the training program. They can be considered as expression of the *short period effectiveness* of the training program. We have determined the short period effectiveness of a training program by calculating the difference between the scores of the participants of a training program on the pretest and their scores on the posttest. A training program is on the short period effective if an increase in (one or more aspects of) the integrity of the participants have been observed.

The long period effectiveness of the two evaluated training programs has been determined by executing a second posttest in the experimental municipalities. This second posttest took place a half up to three-quarter year after the pretest. For the third time a questionnaire was decreased amongst the participants of the training programs. In addition to our research activities in the experimental municipalities we also decreased a questionnaire in the control municipalities at two different times. The first time the questionnaire was decreased in the control municipalities coincided with the pretest in the experimental municipalities. The second test in the control municipalities was more or less at the same moment the second posttest took place in the experimental municipalities. The *long period effectiveness* of a training program has been determined by calculating the difference between the scores on the second posttest and the scores on the pretest in the *experimental municipalities*, by calculating the difference between the two tests in the *control municipalities* and by calculating the difference between the aforementioned differences. A training program is *on the long period* effective if the development of (one or more aspects of) the integrity of civil servants in the experimental municipalities is more positive (or less negative) than the development of the integrity of the employees in the control municipalities.

How can the possible influence of certain factors on the effectiveness of integrity training programs be determined by means of empirical research? The possible influence of certain, theoretically relevant factors on the effectiveness of a training program has been established by testing the hypotheses already indicated. It was possible to test a number of hypotheses because the questionnaires used in the experimental municipalities and control municipalities contained not only items for measuring the integrity of civil servants. The questionnaires also comprised items concerning factors which in theory influence the effectiveness of a training program.

5 The short term effectiveness of the training programs

To what extent are integrity training programs effective in practice? Toward the *short term effectiveness* of the training programs the following can be concluded. The municipal officials who attended the training program Kwintus have benefited from the training program. This group of officials have, on average, an increase of integrity. This can be said for the *moral awareness*, as well as for the *level of moral reasoning*. The third aspect of integrity, the degree of moral actions, has not been measured whilst determining the short term effectiveness of the training program. Since the effect of the training program on the moral actions of the municipal officials can be seen only after a certain amount of time (Beck, Van Montfort & Twijnstra 2010, 51-52).

Table 1 shows the short term effectiveness of the training program Kwintus. This table displays the situation before the training program started (pretest) and right after the training program finished (posttest). A score of five corresponds with a high level of moral awareness and moral reasoning. A score of one on the other hand, corresponds with a low level of moral awareness and moral reasoning. The last kolom shows a positive score on the differences for the level of moral awareness as well as the level of moral reasoning. The score on the differences is positive and statistically significant for both aspects of integrity. This means that the training program for the municipal officials in Urban Commune Experiment has led to an increase of the level of moral awareness and an increase of the level of moral reasoning.

Table 1: Short term effectiveness of training program Kwintus on moral awareness and moral reasoning

Aspect of integrity	Average score before the training	Average score after the training	Differences of scores
Moral awareness	4.46 (N = 80)	4.63 (N = 80)	0.17 (t = 3.211, p = 0.002)
Moral reasoning	4.14 (N = 80)	4.99 (N = 80)	0.85 (t = 6.962, p = 0.000)

(Source: Beck, Van Montfort & Twijnstra 2010, 52-53)

The training program Oleander has on the other hand been less beneficial for the attendants. The group municipal officials who filled in the questionnaires did not benefit, on average, from the training. The scores of these municipal officials were not (much) higher after the attendance of the training program then before the training started as you can see in table 2. This means that the training program for the municipal officials in Rural Commune Experiment has not led to an increase of the level of moral awareness and an increase of the level of moral reasoning.

Table 2: Short term effectiveness of training program Oleander on moral awareness and moral reasoning

Aspect of integrity	Average score before the training	Average score after the training	Differences of scores
Moral awareness	4.47 (N = 116)	4.60 (N = 116)	0.13 (t = 1.880, p = 0.063)
Moral reasoning	2.84 (N = 116)	2.70 (N = 116)	-0.14 (t = -1.096, p = 0.275)

(Source: Beck, Van Montfort & Twijnstra 2010, 60 and 62)

6 The long term effectiveness of the training programs

There can be concluded that there is no *long term effectiveness* of the training programs. The outcomes of the data extracted from the group of municipal officials who filled in a questionnaire show that attending the programs did not lead to an increase of the level of moral awareness, an increase of the level of moral reasoning or an increase of the level of moral actions for the officials. This can be seen in table 3 for the officials who attended the training program Kwintus.²

Table 3: *The long term effectiveness of the training program Kwintus on three aspects of integrity*

		Differences of scores (average score last measure minus average score first measure)	Differences of scores Urban Commune Experiment minus differences of scores Urban Commune Control
Moral awareness	Urban Commune Experiment	0.29 (N = 80 and 35)	0.33 (t = 1,870, p = 0.061)
	Urban Commune Control	-0.04 (N = 41 and 35)	
Moral reasoning	Urban Commune Experiment	-0.45 (N = 80 and 35)	-1.04 (t = -2,047, p = 0,040)
	Urban Commune Control	0.59 (N = 36 and 36)	
Moral actions	Urban Commune Experiment	0.14 (N = 80 and 34)	0.34 (t = 1,477, p = 0,139)
	Urban Commune Control	-0.20 (N = 41 and 36)	

(Source: Beck, Van Montfort & Twijnstra 2010, 70, 72 and 75)

In table 3 can be seen that the officials of Urban Commune Control, who didn't attend a training program, have an increase in their level of moral reasoning while the officials of Urban Commune Experiment have not. The training program Kwintus therefore seems to have a negative effect on the level of moral reasoning. However, this conclusion is too negative. The cause of this 'negative' effect can be found in the fact that the respondents of Urban Commune Experiment are higher educated than the group of respondents of the Urban Commune Control group. According to our empirical study there is a strong statistical correlation between the level of education of a official and his level of moral reasoning. The most plausible conclusion based on our research findings is that the training program did not

² The data in table 3 have been calculated using a Independent-Samples T test. The data in table 4 have been determined by a so-called Paired-Samples T test (Beck, Van Montfort & Twijnstra 2010, 70 and 78).

cause an effect on the level of moral reasoning of the municipal officials of Urban Commune Experiment (Beck, Van Montfort & Twijnstra 2010, 73).

The information in table 4 shows that the training program Oleander also does not have long term effect.

Table 4: The long term effectiveness of the training program Oleander on three aspects of integrity

		Differences of scores (average score last measure minus average score first measure)	Differences of scores Urban Commune Experiment minus differences of scores Urban Commune Control
Moral awareness	Rural Commune Experiment	0.02 (N = 46)	-0.16 (t = -0.921, p = 0.360)
	Rural Commune Control	0.18 (N = 35)	
Moral reasoning	Rural Commune Experiment	0.22 (N = 45)	0.45 (t = 1.355, p = 0.179)
	Rural Commune Control	-0.23 (N = 35)	
Moral actions	Rural Commune Experiment	-0.22 (N = 47)	-0.14 (t = -0.970, p = 0.335)
	Rural Commune Control	-0.08 (N = 35)	

(Source: Beck, Van Montfort & Twijnstra 2010, 78 and 80-81)

7 Individual differences between municipal officials

The fact that the training programs analysed on a *group-level* are only slightly effective, does not mean that there are no differences between *individual municipal officials*. Some officials have benefited more from the training program than others. These individual differences are visible with respect to both the short term effectiveness and the long term effectiveness of the training programs (Beck, Van Montfort & Twijnstra 2010, 58, 67, 76, 86 and 93).

Explanation. The individual differences can be partially explained by the factors that, according to theory, influence the effectiveness of the training program. Our empirical research could only demonstrate the influence on the effectiveness of the training programs for some factors. The following factors appeared to have influence: ethical climate (a negative ethical climate improves the short term effectiveness); gender of the participant (male participants benefit more of the training program than the female participants on the short term); function of the participant (the short term effectiveness of the training programs of officials with an executive function is lower than officials with a policy or a combined function, the long term effectiveness however is higher for officials with an executive

function than officials with a policy or a combined function); educational level of the participant (participants who have a lower educational level benefit more from the training programs than participants with a high educational level on the long term); the possibility to introduce practice examples (participants who had the possibility to introduce practice examples did not benefit as much from the training program on the short term as participants who did not get this possibility) (Beck, Van Montfort & Twijnstra 2010, 54-58, 63-66, 76 and 82-85).

8 Conclusions and recommendations

Looking back at the central question formulated at the introduction of this paper, can first be mentioned that only one of the two training programs is effective on the short term. Only the training program Kwintus has a positive short term effect on the aspects moral awareness and moral reasoning. The training program Oleander on the other hand does not lead to changes of the moral awareness and moral reasoning of the participants. Apparently, some training programs are affective on the short term, while others are not.

We believe that the fact that the training program Kwintus is effective on the short term while the training program Oleander is not, has to do with the different backgrounds of the training programs. The training program Kwintus has been developed especially for governmental institutions. The training program Oleander also focuses on private institutions. It seems that training programs which are made for governmental institutions, are more effective for municipal officials than training programs with a more general character. Furthermore can the duration of the training program influence the short term effectiveness. Training programs that last longer are more effective than short training programs. The effective training program Kwintus lasted a whole day, while the ineffective training program Oleander only lasted a morning or an afternoon.

Moreover can be said that both training programs are not effective on the long term. This disappointing result does not come as a surprise for the training program Oleander. This training already was not effective on the short term. Another explanation has to be found for the training program Kwintus. This explanation can be found in the fact that no follow-up meetings have been arranged. These follow-up meetings were planned by the trainers but cancelled by the municipality.

Finally there can be determined that within both groups of employees who participated in the two training programs, there are differences in the effectiveness of the training program between individual municipal officials. Some municipal officials benefit more from the training program than others. The individual differences can be partially explained by the factors that, according to theory, influence the effectiveness of the training program. Our empirical research could only demonstrate the influence on the effectiveness of the training programs for some factors.

This research provides a good basis for further research into the effectiveness of integrity training programs for officials. Anticipating on further research, the agencies who offer integrity training programs may start to consider extending the duration of the training program. Training programs of only one day or only two sessions are not always effective on the short term. In addition there should be follow-up meetings after the end of the training

program. The possible short term effects will probably be more permanent if these follow-up meetings take place.

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