

# THE VALUE OF LEADERSHIP AND PRINCIPLED LEADERS IN DRIVING INTEGRITY

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Across the broader Australian Public Service (APS), there has been a marked increase in the attention and emphasis directed toward the **concept of integrity**.

This increased focus on integrity within the APS was initially driven by the Independent Review of the APS commissioned by the then Government in May 2018. The Review's Final Report was delivered in 2019 and included a recommendation aimed at reinforcing APS institutional integrity to sustain the highest standards of ethics.

The intention is to develop a **pro-integrity culture** within the APS, and work is still underway for this to be achieved. In October 2022, the Albanese Government announced its APS Reform agenda to further strengthen the APS. This agenda includes four priority areas, the first of which is an "APS that embodies integrity in everything it does". Against this backdrop, there may have never been higher expectations placed upon public officials to conduct themselves with integrity.


To support public officials who are continuing to grapple with this increase in scrutiny and expectations, the APS has established **principles and frameworks** to direct and govern behaviour, that are aligned to legislation such as the *Public Service Act 1999* and the *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013*.

These supports include defined whole-of-government standards such as the APS Values and APS Code of Conduct and are supplemented by agency specific corporate and HR policies.

***But the success of these mechanisms is contingent upon, and may be limited by, their embrace and fulfillment by leaders...***

To effectively support the establishment of a pro-integrity culture and in order to encourage pro-integrity behaviour across the APS, it is integral to **start at the top**.

The tone and values set by leadership, and the extent to which they are overtly espoused and lived up to, lays the foundation for a Pro-integrity culture and values-based behaviour.



In undertaking any assessment of whether leaders and leadership are positively impacting integrity culture, the following concepts are crucial to consider:

- The clarity of values-based communication from leaders.
- How staff perceive leadership's expectations regarding integrity.
- The consistency of behaviour under pressure.
- How leaders handle their missteps.

### **The clarity of values-based communication from leaders**

As outlined earlier, tools and guidance have been developed with an intention to support consistent principles-based behaviour across the APS.

However, as with many high-level policies intended to be broadly applicable, these constructs and concepts may be difficult for staff to translate and apply in their day-to-day roles. Many APS staff may in fact struggle to name all of the APS Values, or all elements of the APS Code of Conduct.

To bring integrity into practice, we must think at a more personal level. The behaviours and values of those we work amongst are easy to recognise and reflect. This is where leadership can start **bringing conceptual integrity into practice**.

Convention says that culturally tone is set at the top, so it is imperative that leaders have a defined and, most importantly, well-communicated set of values.


So, while most leaders reflect on the question "What are my values?", it is just as important to reflect on "Have I **effectively communicated** these values?". In assessing the effectiveness of communication relating to values, the following should be considered:

- Has it been explicitly stated that something is right and/or if something is wrong?
- Is communication overt, public facing, and/or easily accessible?
- Is values/integrity related communication consistent in its messaging?

### **How staff perceive leadership's expectations regarding integrity**

While the point above speaks to the efforts made by leaders to be effective in their communication, a key component of communication is in **how it is received**. The reception of this information, and how its messaging is perceived by staff, is the link between communication and improved behaviours.

Determining whether this has occurred involves establishing if staff's perception of what is right vs what is wrong, or what the important values to a team are, aligns to the expectations communicated by leadership.



**Evaluation** or **reflection** can help to identify, and subsequently rectify, any disconnects emerging in this space. This evaluation can be done by leaders or by anyone looking to review the impact of values and behaviours on integrity.

It can be done through:

- formal interactions, via structured data gathering activities, or
- informal conversations and observations.

These activities should be looking to assess and consider the alignment of the values intended to be communicated by leadership and the perceptions of others.

Continual investment in understanding perceptions is important as it is these perceptions that are most likely to inform and drive behavioural change. This feedback should help to inform leaders of adjustments that made need to be made to their communications to support aligning perceptions with their intended outcomes.

### **The consistency of behaviour under pressure**

While developing a coherent set of values is integral in establishing a pro-integrity culture, **consistency** is how these become **embedded** in the mindset and behaviours of teams.

Discussing and working in alignment with a strong set of values is far easier in a business-as-usual operating environment. Through consistent messaging and consistently living up to this messaging even in challenging moments, leaders can highlight the importance of the values they preach and set an example for their teams to reflect.

In reviewing the impact of leadership on driving improvements in integrity, this is the most important component to evaluate.

When reviewing the behaviours and messaging of leadership, it may be complex to decipher intended messaging or how values are being communicated. It is much easier to assess if there is consistency in this messaging:

- Are the same things being prioritised/communicated?
- Is it easy to align values focused communication with current behaviours?
- Do decisions made under pressure align to the values espoused by leaders?

Through assessing the answers to the questions above, we can establish the degree to which integrity has been embedded in the consistent behaviours of our teams, and the effectiveness of leaders in supporting this outcome.



## How leadership can handle their missteps

The final aspect of leadership to consider, is how to handle situations where a misstep has been made.

When it comes to missteps that impact or impair perceptions relating to integrity, it is almost inevitable that the result is a loss of trust. This loss of trust may just be felt in those impacted, or it could occur more broadly amongst those we are charged with leading.

Trust is integral to a pro-integrity culture, so when the bonds of trust amongst a team or in a relationship have been impacted, an investment must be made to remediate this.

This investment of time and effort should be underpinned by the following principles:

- **A commitment to the truth** – when appropriate, efforts are made to be upfront and forthright regarding what has actually occurred.
- **Transparency in accountability** – leadership or others responsible for any mistakes are clear in taking accountability not only for their actions but for any and all consequences.
- **A willingness to give** – a proactive and genuine willingness to give advice, give time and give of yourself to those who have suffered for the lack of integrity in behaviours or actions.

A pro-integrity culture does not mean that no mistakes are made. However, it does mean that when they are made there are truths told, there is transparency in accountability, and there is an investment made to remediate any damaged trust.

These principles, and the extent to which leaders have lived up to them, should be looked for when evaluating the impact of leadership in supporting the growth of integrity.

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