

## Ethics in the APS

Behaving ethically is critical in the public sector. Public servants exercise authority on behalf of the Australian Government and manage significant financial resources on its behalf. Their actions directly affect the lives of the public and the confidence that the public has in Government.

The Australian public, quite rightly, demands high standards of behaviour and ethical conduct from the people entrusted with this responsibility.

The Australian Public Service (APS) Values and Code of Conduct apply to all APS employees. They provide a robust framework for guiding behaviours and decision making. Paying attention to them and developing skills in balancing their inherent tensions generally becomes easier with practice.

Sometimes, however, guidance may help APS employees to make difficult choices with confidence.

All APS employees need to be able to meet the high standard of professionalism expected of them by the public.

## What is an ethical dilemma?

As public servants we must use our judgement and discretion when making decisions, taking into consideration four aspects:

1. **What are the rules?**
2. **What is our role?**
3. **What are our responsibilities?**
4. **What is the right thing to do?**

Ethical issues are not confined to whether public servants are just obeying the rules or not, although at times applying the rules will resolve the situation—for example, taking Commonwealth property from work without authority for personal use is a breach of the APS Code of Conduct.

But many situations will not be clearly either black or white. There may at times be complex interactions between the rules, roles and responsibilities that face all public servants.

Public servants often face situations where they will need to think about both short and long term consequences, the effect of their decisions on others, and their duty to various people. In these situations, the answers may not be clear cut and there will often be conflicting demands.

As public servants, we don't always have certainty about the consequences of our decisions, yet we must act responsibly and ethically. We may face and resolve problems with an ethical dimension every day in our work when exercising judgement and responsibility, responding to authority, and undertaking different roles.

## What we do

The Ethics Advisory Service assists all APS employees, including SES staff and agency heads, by providing advice on public sector ethical issues.

The Service provides an avenue to seek guidance on how to apply the APS Values and Code of Conduct and strategies and techniques for ethical decision-making in the APS.

### **The Ethics Advisory Service provides:**

- Advice and resources for the application and interpretation of the APS Values and Code of Conduct
- Information on legislative, policy and good practice aspects of managing allegations of misconduct or whistleblowing disclosures
- Advice on strategies and techniques for making ethical decisions in the APS
- Advice on other public sector ethical issues that employees may want to raise

### **The Service does not provide:**

- Advice on the technical and operational aspects of APS employment policy
- Advice on other aspects of public sector legislation, policy or management
- Advice on internal agency policies and processes (unless requested by an agency head, an SES employee or an agency's corporate area)
- Opinion on the merits or outcome of any misconduct or whistleblowing disclosure cases

*The Ethics Advisory Service cannot provide counselling, act as an advocate or offer complaint resolution services. It can, however, advise you how you can access such services.*

## Looking for more information?

The *Client Service Charter* sets out the services that the Ethics Advisory Service will provide and the standard of those services.

Other useful Australian Public Service Commission publications are available from our website at [www.apsc.gov.au/ethics](http://www.apsc.gov.au/ethics):

- Reinvigorating the Westminster Tradition
- In whose interest? Preventing and managing conflicts of interest in the APS
- APS Values and Code of Conduct in Practice: a guide to official conduct for APS employees and agency heads
- Respect: promoting a culture free from harassment and bullying in the APS
- Being Professional in the APS—Values Resources for Facilitators
- Handling Misconduct

APS employees can also access policies, guidance and support in their own agency.

*The Ethics Advisory Service is a key part of the Government's accountability and integrity agenda for the Australian Public Service.*

### Contact us:

Enquiries: **Monday – Friday**  
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If you would like us to contact you, please call or email us with your contact details.



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# Ethics

## Advisory Service

Enhancing  
ethical awareness  
in the APS