Fact sheet

Upholding integrity

As Australian Public Service (APS) employees, we all have an obligation to understand and uphold the APS Values and Employment Principles and act in accordance with the Code of Conduct — as well as demonstrating the highest standards of ethical behaviour. This fact sheet suggests ways to maintain and foster integrity and contribute to a workplace that supports employees to make good choices, consistently, and with confidence.

## APS employees

### Understand your obligations

* Become familiar and act in accordance with the APS Values, Employment Principles and Code of Conduct, as well as Commission guidance—e.g. APS Values and Code of Conduct in Practice.
* Know your agency’s policies—e.g. conflict of interest, social media, harassment.
* Understand your performance obligations, including expected behaviours. Performance obligations relating to all APS employee are set out in the Commissioner’s Directions 2016.

### Act with integrity

* Do the right thing—integrity should be central to every action and every decision, every day.
* Call out poor behaviour—do it in the moment if you feel safe to do so, or report it to your manager or HR. Don’t ignore it.
* Support your peers—be available to help when you can; make it safe for colleagues to come to you with questions or concerns.
* When in doubt, discuss. If you don’t know what is expected of you, if you’re not sure how the APS Values and Code of Conduct apply in a particular situation, if something doesn’t feel right—talk about it, e.g. with your manager, HR, or the Commission’s Ethics Advisory Service.

## Managers and supervisors

In addition to their obligations as individual APS employees, managers and supervisors have particular responsibilities in upholding integrity in the APS.

### Help staff understand and apply the APS Values, Employment Principles and Code of Conduct

* Make sure your staff are aware of the APS Values, Employment Principles and Code of Conduct, the Commission’s guidance material, agency policies, and where to go for help—starting with you.
* Provide easy access to integrity information and guidance, and support this with regular training and awareness-raising activities.
* Set and clarify specific performance and behavioural expectations for employees. Provide feedback that is clear, honest, timely, respectful, and useful. Performance obligations for supervisors are set out in s.39A of the Commissioner’s Directions.

### Supporting employees to act with integrity

* Work with employees to ensure they have the skills to identify integrity issues, the capacity to raise and address them in a way that is appropriate to their classification, and the opportunity to practise ethical decision-making in a safe environment.
* Role-model good practice and behaviour—including ethical decision making and addressing difficult issues with sensitivity and courage.

### Create a psychologically safe workplace[[1]](#footnote-1)

* Make it safe for employees to raise ideas and concerns. Make time to listen, and focus on understanding the issue before forming a judgement. If an employee has made a mistake, start by asking yourself: ‘How can I help you learn from this?’
* When an employee displays behaviour of concern, reflect on an appropriate response. Consider the broader context of the behaviour, as well as its possible impact on the workplace and on trust in the APS. Address small issues promptly, proportionately and sensitively—so they don’t become big ones.
* Be available to support your peers—model collaboration and pool your knowledge and skills to achieve better outcomes.
* When in doubt, discuss—managers are not expected to have all the answers, and complex issues benefit from a range of perspectives. Seek support from colleagues, your manager, HR or the Commission’s Ethics Advisory Service.

### Address systemic issues

* Sometimes an employee’s behaviour may be a symptom of a broader issue in the team or the agency—e.g. a culture in which employees don’t feel valued, or where insufficient oversight is built into systems or processes. Recognise these situations, address the problem if you can, and escalate it if needed.

## HR practitioners

### Help staff understand and apply the APS Values, Employment Principles and Code of Conduct

* Ensure employees and managers have the knowledge and resources they need to uphold integrity. Promote awareness of the APS Values, Employment Principles and Code of Conduct, Commission guidance, agency policies, and avenues for help and support. Ensure these are available on an ongoing basis, not only on commencement as part of an employee’s induction.
* Ensure agency procedures, delegations and policies are consistent with legislative obligations, and are up-to-date and accessible.
* Support your agency head in exercising their obligations in relation to effective performance, consistent with s.39 of the Commissioner’s Directions.

### Engage employees in modelling integrity

* Support managers in managing employee performance and behaviour, and in exploring and implementing early intervention strategies that are timely, proportionate, and tailored to the issue.
* Ensure employees are aware of the various avenues for reporting unacceptable behaviour and help employees feel safe to report.

### Support psychologically safe workplaces

* Ensure employees have access to—and are aware of—the tools, resources, and support they need to do their jobs well, seek advice, and access assistance with personal difficulties as well as work related concerns.
* Support managers to create safe workplaces, including by assisting them to conduct difficult conversations productively and with empathy.

### Address systemic issues

* Use the information available to you to identify and address systemic issues. Useful information can include data from the APS Employee Census and themes arising from misconduct cases.
* Identify agency-wide solutions to systemic or cultural issues, and seek buy-in of senior leadership to implement these, having regard to benefits for productivity, reduction in resource-intensive misconduct processes, and upholding the agency’s reputation.

## Senior Executive Service (SES) and Agency Heads

SES leaders set the tone for workplace culture and expectations. They are held to high standards of personal behaviour, are viewed as role models of integrity and professionalism, and are expected to foster a culture that makes it safe and straightforward for employees to do the right thing.

APS Agency Heads have an increased role as the stewards of organisational culture. In addition to working closely with SES to uphold and promote integrity, they set and articulate an organisational vision for integrity culture. They must show consistent leadership and exemplify the highest standards of professionalism.

### Model and promote the APS Values, Employment Principles and Code of Conduct

* Understand your obligations to model and uphold the APS Values, Employment Principles and Code of Conduct.
* Actively promote awareness of the APS Values, Employment Principles and Code of Conduct, as well as avenues for help and discussion.
* Set performance expectations that value behaviour as much as delivery, and demonstrate through your own behaviour that how we work together is just as important as what we deliver.
* Performance obligations for Agency Heads are set out in s.39 of the Commissioner’s Directions. Section35 of the Public Service Act 1999 sets out the constitution and role of SES.

### Be a role model for integrity

* Identify and communicate how the APS Values, Employment Principles and Code of Conduct apply in the work of your agency and area of oversight, and to specific issues as they arise. Highlight that integrity should be central to every action and every decision, every day.
* Make it safe for employees to raise concerns with you, and to admit mistakes and learn from them. Also ensure your managers are skilled and capable in making it safe for their direct reports to raise concerns with them.
* Ensure employees have confidence to call out unacceptable behaviour—make it clear you’ll take it seriously and respond proportionately. Make time to listen; seek to understand the problem; and take a collaborative approach to finding a solution.
* If you make undertakings to employees, ensure these are realistic and feasible—and then do what you say you’ll do.

### Create and champion psychologically safe workplaces

* Create an authorising environment for questions and discussion. Engage with questions transparently and in good faith—if there is information which, for legitimate reasons, you can’t provide, be transparent about this too.
* ‘Sweat the small stuff’—address minor issues, do what you say you’ll do even in relation to seemingly inconsequential matters, pay attention to small changes in people or workplace culture. In doing so, you can prevent small issues from becoming big ones, and can earn the trust of your employees to do the right thing regardless of its immediate value to you.
* Address suspected misconduct in a fair, timely and effective way—this includes supporting staff to manage concerns relating to their own direct reports in a fair and timely way.
* Identify and address cultural and systemic issues that may underpin individual instances of concerning behaviour. Seek to understand why the incident occurred, and whether systemic change is needed to prevent recurrence.

1. Mr Stephen Sedgwick’s [*Report into consultations regarding APS approaches to ensure institutional integrity*](https://www.apsc.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-03/report_into_consultations_regarding_aps_approaches_to_ensure_institutional_integrity.pdf) describes psychologically safe workplaces as a work environment in which ‘…ideas or sensitive issues can be productively discussed without fear of adverse consequences.’ In addition to addressing integrity concerns, these workplaces promote innovation and increased productivity. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)