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Committee on
Standards in
Public Life

24 January 2023

OPEN LETTER TO PUBLIC SECTOR LEADERS

We have today published our report, *Leading in Practice*. We have looked at how organisations in the public, private and charitable sectors build ethical values into their ways of working. Our report features practical case studies and poses some questions for leaders.

I recognise that the demands on you as public sector leaders are numerous and diverse. You are leading government departments and public bodies that are grappling with complex challenges and it must be tempting to focus on delivery above all else. But building an organisational culture where the Principles of Public Life are deeply embedded in policies and practices supports the delivery of public services.

Doing things in the right way and in the public interest is critical for public confidence in the bodies that operate on the public's behalf. A robust ethical culture also supports effective risk management - if people see thinking about ethical issues as part of their job and feel safe to speak up, this can highlight potential areas of concern before they escalate. A values-driven culture is also good for morale and can help to attract and retain the highest calibre staff.

Our evidence shows that an ethical culture does not emerge by accident. It requires discussion and action. There is no one-size-fits-all solution. So we have identified 20 questions for leaders (attached) to help you to take the pulse of your organisation and reflect on whether there is more you can do to support your people to think about the Principles of Public Life and to integrate them into all aspects of how your organisation operates.

We hope that you find these case studies and questions a helpful resource.

If you would like to discuss these questions and our report, please do get in touch. Our email address is: public@public-standards.gov.uk

Yours,



Lord Evans of Weardale KCB DL
Chair, Committee on Standards in Public Life

Questions for leaders

Communicating values and leading by example

1. How do the people in your organisation know that you care about the Principles of Public Life?
2. What do you do to help people understand how the Principles of Public Life translate to the standards of behaviour expected in their day-to-day work?
3. How do you address behaviour that is not consistent with the Principles of Public Life?
4. How do you know that people across your organisation are hearing a consistent tone from their managers in relation to the standards of behaviour expected of them?

Encouraging a 'speak up' culture

5. Are there clear and well-understood ways that people across your organisation can raise their concerns when things 'just don't feel right'? How do you know these routes are trusted?
6. What do you do to ensure that retaliation is not tolerated in your organisation?
7. How do you ensure you are listening to the concerns and suggestions of people in your organisation? Are you being open and transparent in communicating the outcome to people in your organisation, while respecting confidentiality?
8. How do you know the managers in your organisation are listening and responding well to concerns that are raised directly with them?

Training, discussion and decision-making

9. Is your staff training specific to the ethical risks and challenges faced by your organisation?
10. How do you encourage leaders at all levels to discuss the practical application of the Principles of Public Life in their teams?
11. Have you considered whether the people in your organisation might benefit from dedicated support for considering ethical issues, such as ethics committees or counsellors?
12. How do you know that people in your organisation are making consistently good decisions that take into account the Principles of Public Life?

Governance

13. Is your board clear on their role in relation to the ethical culture of the organisation?
14. Does your risk assessment process identify and monitor the key ethical risks for your organisation?
15. Does your board have access to the range of data needed to assess and monitor the ethical health of your organisation and to identify potential areas of concern?
16. How do you ensure your organisation takes necessary action where the data suggests that changes are needed?
17. When things have gone wrong in your organisation, could the signs have been spotted and addressed earlier?

Recruitment and performance management

18. Does your recruitment and selection process place sufficient weight on the extent to which candidates' personal values align with the Principles of Public Life?
19. How does your organisation's selection process test the ability of candidates to exercise sound judgement when faced with ethical dilemmas?
20. Do the performance management processes of your organisation give sufficient weight to how individuals deliver on their objectives, as well as the outcomes that are achieved?