



# PRINCIPLES FOR MANAGING ETHICS IN THE PUBLIC SERVICE

## OECD RECOMMENDATION

The OECD Council adopted a Recommendation on Improving Ethical Conduct in the Public Service on 23 April 1998. The Recommendation is based on a set of Principles for Managing Ethics in the Public Service agreed in the Public Management Committee, to help Member countries to review their ethics management systems.

*Although governments have different cultural, political and administrative environments, they often confront similar ethical challenges, and the responses in their ethics management show common characteristics...*

*Member countries need to have a point of reference when combining the elements of an effective ethics management system in line with their own political, administrative and cultural circumstances...*

*Preamble to the OECD Recommendation*

**PUMA Policy Brief No. 4**

**Public Management Service  
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**On the proposal of the Public Management Committee  
the OECD Council  
recommends that**

Member countries take action to ensure well-functioning institutions and systems for promoting ethical conduct in the public service. This can be achieved by:

- developing and regularly reviewing policies, procedures, practices and institutions influencing ethical conduct in the public service;
- promoting government action to maintain high standards of conduct and counter corruption in the public sector;
- incorporating the ethical dimension into management frameworks to ensure that management practices are consistent with the values and principles of public service;
- combining judiciously those aspects of ethics management systems based on ideals with those based on the respect of rules;
- assessing the effects of public management reforms on public service ethical conduct;
- using as a reference the Principles for Managing Ethics in the Public Service to ensure high standards of ethical conduct.

**The OECD Council  
instructs the Public Management Committee to**

- analyse information provided by Member countries on how they apply these principles in their respective national contexts. The purpose of the analysis is to provide information on a comparative basis to support Member country actions to maintain well-functioning institutions and systems for promoting ethics;
- provide support to Member countries to improve conduct in the public service by, *inter alia*, facilitating the process of information-sharing and disseminating promising practices in Member countries;
- present a report in two years' time analysing the experiences, actions and practices in the Member countries that have proved effective in a particular national context.

# Principles for Managing Ethics in the Public Service

## **1. Ethical standards for public service should be clear.**

Public servants need to know the basic principles and standards they are expected to apply to their work and where the boundaries of acceptable behaviour lie. A concise, well-publicised statement of core ethical standards and principles that guide public service, for example in the form of a code of conduct, can accomplish this by creating a shared understanding across government and within the broader community.

## **2. Ethical standards should be reflected in the legal framework.**

The legal framework is the basis for communicating the minimum obligatory standards and principles of behaviour for every public servant. Laws and regulations could state the fundamental values of public service and should provide the framework for guidance, investigation, disciplinary action and prosecution.

## **3. Ethical guidance should be available to public servants.**

Professional socialisation should contribute to the development of the necessary judgement and skills enabling public servants to apply ethical principles in concrete circumstances. Training facilitates ethics awareness and can develop essential skills for ethical analysis and moral reasoning. Impartial advice can help create an environment in which public servants are more willing to confront and resolve ethical tensions and problems. Guidance and internal consultation mechanisms should be made available to help public servants apply basic ethical standards in the workplace.

## **4. Public servants should know their rights and obligations when exposing wrongdoing.**

Public servants need to know what their rights and obligations are in terms of exposing actual or suspected wrongdoing within the public service. These should include clear rules and procedures for officials to follow, and a formal chain of responsibility. Public servants also need to know what protection will be available to them in cases of exposing wrongdoing.

**5. Political commitment to ethics should reinforce the ethical conduct of public servants.**

Political leaders are responsible for maintaining a high standard of propriety in the discharge of their official duties. Their commitment is demonstrated by example and by taking action that is only available at the political level, for instance by creating legislative and institutional arrangements that reinforce ethical behaviour and create sanctions against wrongdoing, by providing adequate support and resources for ethics-related activities throughout government and by avoiding the exploitation of ethics rules and laws for political purposes.

**6. The decision-making process should be transparent and open to scrutiny.**

The public has a right to know how public institutions apply the power and resources entrusted to them. Public scrutiny should be facilitated by transparent and democratic processes, oversight by the legislature and access to public information. Transparency should be further enhanced by measures such as disclosure systems and recognition of the role of an active and independent media.

**7. There should be clear guidelines for interaction between the public and private sectors.**

Clear rules defining ethical standards should guide the behaviour of public servants in dealing with the private sector, for example regarding public procurement, outsourcing or public employment conditions. Increasing interaction between the public and private sectors demands that more attention should be placed on public service values and requiring external partners to respect those same values.

**8. Managers should demonstrate and promote ethical conduct.**

An organisational environment where high standards of conduct are encouraged by providing appropriate incentives for ethical behaviour, such as adequate working conditions and effective performance assessment, has a direct impact on the daily practice of public service values and ethical standards. Managers have an important role in this regard by providing consistent leadership and serving as role models in terms of ethics and conduct in their professional relationship with political leaders, other public servants and citizens.

## **9. Management policies, procedures and practices should promote ethical conduct.**

Management policies and practices should demonstrate an organisation's commitment to ethical standards. It is not sufficient for governments to have only rule-based or compliance-based structures. Compliance systems alone can inadvertently encourage some public servants simply to function on the edge of misconduct, arguing that if they are not violating the law they are acting ethically. Government policy should not only delineate the minimal standards below which a government official's actions will not be tolerated, but also clearly articulate a set of public service values that employees should aspire to.

## **10. Public service conditions and management of human resources should promote ethical conduct.**

Public service employment conditions, such as career prospects, personal development, adequate remuneration and human resource management policies should create an environment conducive to ethical behaviour. Using basic principles, such as merit, consistently in the daily process of recruitment and promotion helps operationalise integrity in the public service.

## **11. Adequate accountability mechanisms should be in place within the public service.**

Public servants should be accountable for their actions to their superiors and, more broadly, to the public. Accountability should focus both on compliance with rules and ethical principles and on achievement of results. Accountability mechanisms can be internal to an agency as well as government-wide, or can be provided by civil society. Mechanisms promoting accountability can be designed to provide adequate controls while allowing for appropriately flexible management.

## **12. Appropriate procedures and sanctions should exist to deal with misconduct.**

Mechanisms for the detection and independent investigation of wrongdoing such as corruption are a necessary part of an ethics infrastructure. It is necessary to have reliable procedures and resources for monitoring, reporting and investigating breaches of public service rules, as well as commensurate administrative or disciplinary sanctions to discourage misconduct. Managers should exercise appropriate judgement in using these mechanisms when actions need to be taken.

## About this Policy Brief ...

### Challenges for managing ethics

High standards of conduct in the public service have become a critical issue for governments in OECD Member countries. Public management reforms involving greater devolution of responsibility and discretion for public servants, budgetary pressures and new forms of delivery of public services have challenged traditional values in the public service. Globalisation and the further development of international economic relations, including trade and investment, demand high recognisable standards of conduct in the public service. Preventing misconduct is as complex as the phenomenon of misconduct itself, and a range of integrated mechanisms are needed for success, including sound ethics management systems.

### Reviewing the ethics management system

Increased concern about decline of confidence in government and corruption has prompted governments to review their approaches to ethical conduct. In response to these challenges, the Public Management Committee agreed to a set of *Principles for Managing Ethics in the Public Service* to help countries review the institutions, systems and mechanisms they have for promoting public service ethics. These principles identify the functions of guidance, management or control against which public ethics management systems can be checked. They draw on the experience of OECD countries, and reflect shared views of sound ethics management.

### The Principles have broad practical application

The principles may be used by management across national and sub-national levels of government. Political leaders may use them to review ethics management regimes and evaluate the extent to which ethics is operationalised throughout government. The principles are intended to be an instrument for countries to adapt to national conditions, and to find their own ways of balancing the various aspirational and compliance elements to arrive at an effective framework to suit their own circumstances. They are not sufficient in themselves -- they should be seen as a way of integrating ethics management with the broader public management environment.

The Principles were developed with the help of a Reference Group, discussed at the Public Management Committee of the OECD and reviewed at a Symposium held on 4-5 November 1997 in Paris. After a final review by the Committee in March 1998, the OECD Council approved them and issued a Recommendation on 23 April 1998. At their annual meeting of 27-28 April 1998, OECD Ministers welcomed the Recommendation and asked to receive a report on this issue in 2000.

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