



Australian Government



# Guide to Integrity Conversations

**Supporting and encouraging integrity conversations in the workplace**



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## Purpose

This guide is designed to assist Australian Public Service (APS) employees to encourage an environment that supports integrity conversations in the workplace.

Conversations about integrity are vital to shaping actions, practices and cultures that sustain a professional, ethical and trusted APS. These conversations can serve different purposes and take different forms; however, they all have one thing in common – embedding integrity into everything we do.

The purpose of this guide is to support you to understand why these conversations are important, when and how to have them in your agency, and how to use them to help drive a strong integrity culture.

This guide is structured around the following questions:

- Why are integrity conversations important?
- Who can have integrity conversations?
- What types of integrity conversations can we have?
- When should we have integrity conversations?
- How should we prepare for integrity conversations?

## How to use this guide

- This guide is designed to support all APS employees in having regular, proactive integrity conversations.
- The information is adaptable to various situations and contexts.
- The guide will also help APS employees have integrity conversations that may be required to address a specific situation.

## Why integrity conversations are important

Integrity should be a central consideration in all work in the APS and, to that end, the APS must maintain and foster a culture at the institutional level that values, acknowledges and champions 'doing the right thing'.

See ['Defining Integrity' fact sheet for further information](#).

*"Integrity in the APS is the pursuit of high standards of professionalism—both in what we do and in how we do it. It is the foundation of trust on which public service effectiveness is built. Integrity is the craft of bringing ethics and values to life through our work and our behaviour, and earning the trust of the public in our ability to deliver the best outcomes for Australia"*

(Stephen Sedgwick AO).

[Report into consultations regarding APS approaches to institutional integrity \(2020\)](#).

A pro-integrity culture involves the embedding of integrity into an agency's workplace culture, where it is a core consideration of all it does – from the conduct of its individual employees, to its systems and practices.

One way to uphold this is to support and encourage regular integrity discussions within your agency to ensure that integrity is a primary motivating factor in the day-to-day conduct of employees.

In addition, they create an environment where employees feel safe and supported to raise integrity concerns before they occur or as soon as possible after they occur, which increases the likelihood of preventing misconduct and speedy resolution of problems.

At times, integrity conversations may be viewed as too sensitive or difficult and, therefore, are approached with apprehension or avoided altogether; however, difficult conversations are a normal part of the workplace, even if they may make you feel uncomfortable at times. If handled well, integrity conversations provide you with an opportunity to resolve issues quickly and avoid escalation.



### Refer to Scenario 1:

*Communicating integrity and its value*

## Who can have integrity conversations

All APS employees can and should be having regular integrity conversations. While leaders are expected to role model this behaviour and set the tone from the top, all employees, at all levels, should be supported to engage in positive integrity conversations.

If you consider an integrity conversation is required in response to an issue, determine whether you are the best person to initiate the conversation. If you are unsure, you may wish to seek guidance from:

- your supervisor or manager
- a trusted colleague
- your agency's HR or integrity area, including Ethics Contact Officers
- external support services, such as the Australian Public Service Commission's Ethics Advisory Service.

If you are the right person to have an integrity conversation, initiating it as early as possible after you become aware of any issue can prevent it from escalating.

## Types of integrity conversations

Integrity conversations can be broken down into two broad categories:

1. Proactive integrity conversations that contribute to uplifting a pro-integrity culture.
2. Reactive integrity conversations that are required in response to a concern or incident.

### Proactive integrity conversations

Employees are encouraged to have proactive integrity conversations as part of their day-to-day work. These conversations can help develop a meaningful integrity culture and build capabilities to navigate, and reflect on, working with integrity.

### Note:

It is important to distinguish between integrity violations, which may have formal reporting requirements, and matters that can be addressed through integrity conversations. Some serious matters should be reported through [formal channels](#) and often require investigations. This could include instances of theft, sexual harassment, misuse of sensitive information or fraud.

To understand when a matter should be formally reported and through what channel, employees are encouraged to contact their HR or integrity team or the Ethics Advisory Service.

While these conversations can be formal or informal, they will provide an opportunity for employees to consider what working with integrity looks like. Some people will default to discussing compliance and assurance measures. Use these discussions to broaden their perspective. The following points may assist in framing positive integrity conversations:

- What would you expect to see, hear, experience and do in a workplace with a pro-integrity culture?
- How well do you understand your role and agency, and how would you describe the functions of each?
- Regulations, codes of conduct, guidelines and values set the scope of authority that any role or agency has to act and clarify what 'serving with integrity' means. What are the rules that apply to your role, work and agency? How well do you know them?
- If you were to welcome a new colleague to a similar role tomorrow, how would you describe what performing the role with integrity involves? In particular, highlight aspects for which formal guidance does not exist.
- How would people feel and act in a workplace that has a pro-integrity culture?
  - What would they feel safe to do? Not do?
  - How might they approach all their work with an integrity lens?

## Reactive integrity conversations

Many signs can indicate that an integrity conversation may be needed. Often these are surfaced in the ordinary course of working with colleagues, such as overhearing an offhand remark or making a decision on a prospective candidate or contractor. Sometimes more formal mechanisms can reveal or bring into focus an integrity concern, such as employee surveys, audit findings or complaints. See section on HOW to prepare for integrity conversations for further guidance.

## When to have integrity conversations

Integrity can be woven into nearly all areas of our daily work. Making these discussions a regular part of decision-making processes, planning and reflection is a way of building integrity conversations into the culture and ways of working of a team.

- **Team meetings** – for example, a standing agenda item at monthly team meetings. This provides employees with regular opportunities to share observations, identify positive actions and identify areas for improvement.
- **Performance conversations** – a chance to discuss what working with integrity means for you and your manager or employee.
- **Project planning and reviews** – integrity discussions can form a useful part of project planning. What processes and decisions might emerge in a project and what integrity issues would they raise? This dialogue and learning can stimulate helpful perspectives to shape conduct and direction throughout the project. Invite colleagues to reflect upon how the process and outcomes of the work align with the agency's values and code of conduct. Were there any decisions or practices that prompted us to consider our integrity framework?
- **Address it as standalone topic** – it may be that an integrity conversation is delivered via a stand-alone address, event or training activity.

- **Incident-specific** – reactive integrity conversations that may be triggered by a specific incident or concern. While these conversations are generally only had with the parties involved, in some circumstances – without breaching privacy and confidentiality – these situations can be used as broader learning conversations for a workplace.



### Refer to Scenario 2:

*Strengthening integrity dialogue*

## How to prepare for integrity conversations

### Preparing for effective integrity conversations

#### 1. Identify and frame your message

- a. Gather relevant examples
- b. Confirm intentions
- c. Consider organisational relevance

#### 2. Prepare:

- a. Consider the logistics
- b. Consider all perspectives
- c. What are possible solutions
- d. Seek support
- e. Consider skills required

#### 3. Use ethical language

#### 4. Manage emotions

#### 5. Close the loop

#### 6. Document

### Identify and frame your message

Ensure you can clearly articulate the integrity issue you wish to discuss and provide specific examples, where possible (without breaching confidences, where this is a relevant factor).

Ask yourself:

- Why is it important to have this conversation?
- What do I want to achieve?
- Is the desired outcome realistic?

Another opportunity to make integrity conversations more relevant and impactful is to frame the message in terms that are relevant to your agency, its work and purpose. Emphasise the impact of the issue on the agency's ability to achieve its goals for the communities it serves, and potentially cause reputational damage to its standing as a trusted public institution. This approach is particularly helpful for discussing integrity issues within teams as it brings into focus what integrity means for us in more direct and tangible terms.

### Prepare

Not all integrity conversations will require preparation; however, it is considered good practice in most instances and can help you to identify the purpose of the conversation and ensure you feel ready to both speak and listen.

- **Logistics** - consider the most suitable timing and setting for the discussion. If it is an incident-specific conversation, it is generally better to schedule the conversation as soon as possible, once initial emotions have settled. Ensure you have sufficient time and privacy for the conversation, so you will not be rushed or interrupted. Have the conversation face-to-face if possible, being mindful of the room's layout as sitting directly opposite may seem formal or intimidating.
- **Consider all perspectives** - participate with an open mind and genuinely seek to understand other perspectives or suggested solutions. Do not attribute or assume motivations for past behaviour, instead listen to others' points of view.
- **Possible solutions** - consider what desired solutions may look like. Is it a change in performance or behaviour? Consider what additional information you may need to formulate a solution and what questions you will need to ask.
- **Seek support** - consider consulting with peers or colleagues who you trust and use them to test the preparation you have done. Be sure to include all relevant parties and consider whether to bring in an expert or support person.
- **Consider skills required** - practise and reflect on the interpersonal and leadership skills needed for an effective conversation. These may include:
  - Active listening
  - Willingness to compromise and negotiate
  - Empathy
  - Resilience
  - Problem solving

While it is important to prepare, avoid using a script as it may hinder your ability to listen effectively and engage in productive conversation. Use this information as a guide that you can adapt to your needs rather than a rigid process to follow.

## Use ethical language

When engaging in integrity conversations, using ethical language can serve to clarify the integrity issue and support others to better understand the issue and adjust their behaviour appropriately.

Framing the issue in ethical terms could start by referencing relevant established principles, values or expectations, such as the [APS Values](#) or [Code of Conduct](#). Emphasising or exploring the impacts of a concerning action on various stakeholders can strengthen ethical awareness – ensuring people understand both the concern and its impact.

For example:

*“...this behaviour is not consistent with our values of being accountable and ethical. This may impact upon the trust we have built with our colleagues and our reputation within the organisation.”*



### Refer to Scenario 3:

*Responding to integrity concerns*

## Manage emotions

Often a difficult integrity conversation can go wrong because of the emotions involved. Approach the conversation rationally and objectively with a low and calm tone of voice. Be conscious of what your body language may be saying – is it signalling that you are approachable and ready to listen?

When approached with an integrity issue, people may feel threatened and become defensive if they feel their needs are not being met or their feelings are not being recognised. Understanding that these feelings are common responses and consciously adjusting your approach and messaging can avoid or mitigate challenges in reaching an agreeable outcome.

Focus on the integrity issue as you understand it and avoid ascribing motivations or challenging the other person's own sense of morality or perception. Be conscious of the setting for your conversation, ensuring it is in a private space, and be careful to avoid positions that establish or reinforce any power differences (such as sitting behind a desk in your

office). Where possible, frame your message in positive terms, while not overshadowing the risks or harms of behaviour. This can make important messages easier for others to engage with.

- **Listen and ask for clarification** - be curious and ask open questions (for example: “What has been your experience?”) to explore other points of view. If an employee feels heard and understood they will be more likely to be actively engaged in the conversation.
- **Acknowledge** - confirm and acknowledge what others have expressed, asking clarifying questions where appropriate. Remember that acknowledging and agreeing are different. You may need to acknowledge that there are differences in perceptions.
- **Reassess your position** - be prepared to reassess and clarify your position without minimising any other perspectives. If your position has changed after hearing others' views, explain why and how you came to a new conclusion.
- **Seek collaborative solutions** - invite others to offer possible solutions, remembering that the best resolutions are likely those that satisfy all parties, where this can be achieved.

If the conversation is not going well, or is failing to reach the intended outcome, consider whether you can go back to listening and asking for clarification. Alternatively, you may need to politely and professionally close the meeting and suggest regrouping at another time.

## Close the loop

A critical element of building a pro-integrity culture is ensuring that issues are appropriately resolved and communicated. At the end of an integrity conversation, be clear on what the actions and expectations are, and if or when you will follow up on progress or changes. Be sure to check in with those who participated in the conversation at a later time.

## Document

Making a record of the conversation and any agreed actions or outcomes is important in case you need to refer back to what had been discussed at a later time.



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# Appendix 1

# Example scenarios

The following are examples of effective integrity conversations in familiar scenarios in public administration. These are not prescriptive but offer guidance for how these ideas can shape your conversations.





# Scenario 1: Communicating integrity and its value

As a member of your agency's leadership team, you have been invited to speak with the new cohort of graduates. You have been asked to share your perspectives on the work of the agency and how it maintains public trust.

## Approach

### Explain the role of the agency within its authorising environment and the broader public service

- *The purpose of our agency is to...*
- *Our agency's work is ultimately accountable through... with a legislative framework that comprises... and a policy framework that guides our work comprising...*

### Explain what public integrity means

- *Though APS agencies each serve a different role – and it is important to understand the remit and responsibilities of your agency – they share a common purpose and are trusted to act in the best interest of the Australian community.*
- *Integrity is the foundation of public trust. Integrity sets the standard that the Australian community can and should be able to rely upon us to deliver.*

### Use an example that illustrates how integrity applies to your agency's work

- *In practice, working with integrity is ensuring that our values, expressed in the [APS Values](#) and [APS Code of Conduct](#), ultimately guide the way we work.*
- *Provide a specific example from your agency's work or practices. This could emphasise any of the critical dimensions of public integrity: legitimacy, public interest, respect and accountability.*
- *Our agency is often called upon to provide advice on contested policy decisions and services. While members of the community will not always agree with everything we do, and our decisions are open to scrutiny and occasional challenge, working with integrity is how we earn public trust independent of any disagreement.*

## Debrief

Professionalism and integrity require a sound understanding of your role and agency, which can be helpful framing. However, conveying the importance of integrity and explaining how it practically applies to the agency and its work is vital to moving from a compliance orientation towards a pro-integrity culture. See '[Pro-integrity culture](#)' fact sheet for further information.

Give a specific example of integrity in practice that you can reflect on personally. These tend to be the most memorable, and reinforce that integrity is important and is a lived value at your agency.

# Scenario 2: Strengthening integrity dialogue

You are leading a regular fortnightly meeting with your team. You would like to contribute to building a culture where integrity conversations are more commonplace and have allocated some time on the agenda to discuss this.

## Approach

### **Introduce why and how integrity conversations could have a stronger presence within the branch or team**

- *Having regular, open conversations about integrity can build trust and help to recognise and navigate difficult issues when they arise. Framing integrity as a 'learnable skill' helps navigate increasingly complex situations as you progress in your career. Perhaps we could make this a regular practice, say quarterly, as a chance to reflect and check in?*

### **Offer a personal reflection and offer a prompt for others to do the same**

- *I have been reflecting on 'what I've walked past' to surface the kinds of integrity concerns that can arise in our working environment and how to respond to them in the moment or reflect upon them later. The experience that I identified was... What I learned about my own integrity vulnerability from that experience was... One of the lessons for me was that promoting a pro-integrity culture requires not just taking responsibility for my own actions, but also not walking by integrity risks we see around our agency. Has anyone had an experience they would like to share?*
- *A useful technique is an integrity 'pre-mortem' and 'post-mortem' to prompt some structured thought and reflection around situations that may raise integrity issues. We already do similar project planning and review meetings, so integrity could be a useful lens to add to this. Something I realised when thinking about a process I'm designing now was... Has anyone had a similar experience they would like to share?*

## Debrief

All APS employees can demonstrate leadership through signalling the importance of integrity and role modelling how that is reflected in their own behaviour and work practices. In these examples, having the meeting chair set aside the time for this discussion and offer the first examples themselves demonstrate both.

Personal reflections and examples can express messages powerfully and memorably; however, building these practices into the culture of the team or agency – such as through the regular agenda item in this example – needs regular practice and reinforcement.

Instituting and supporting a regular, structured practice of dialogue and reflection on integrity within your team helps to build a shared understanding of integrity in your context. This can mitigate behaviours that create integrity issues, and support employees to raise concerns that do arise. See ['Upholding integrity'](#) fact sheet for further information.

# Scenario 3: Responding to integrity concerns

You overheard a member of your team suggest upgrading the classification of some documents to avoid disclosing them in response to a Freedom of Information (FoI) request. After all, it would be embarrassing if the public found out. How would you approach them to discuss this issue?

## Approach

### Recognise the situation raises integrity concerns, which requires you to respond

- *[As the suggested action would breach FoI legislation and contradict the APS values of being accountable and ethical, the integrity concerns are well founded. As the employee's manager, you are well-positioned to raise this issue.]*

### Ensure an appropriate setting for the conversation

- *[You book a quiet meeting room and ask the team member to join you]*

### State the issue clearly as you see it and invite their response

- *This morning I overheard your suggestion to change the classification of some documents to avoid providing them in response to an FoI request. The APS has established FoI processes and guidance, and this approach would not be consistent with our values of being accountable and ethical. I may not have the full picture, so wanted to raise it with you to understand your perspective.*

### Listen actively, acknowledge their perspectives, and consider the issue in light of any new information

- *I can see how it may have seemed like it was avoiding a possible issue, and I will share with you a copy of our FoI protocols and contacts so you're better prepared for the next one. Ultimately, our values and protocols guide how we respond – especially in potentially difficult situations.*

### Conclude the discussion with agreement on any resolutions or next steps

- *Thank you for reflecting on this. If you're ever unsure about these kinds of issues, talking them through with a colleague can often help to work things through or surface any blind spots.*
- *[Consider whether a general conversation with the team is also necessary]*

## Debrief

Remember that integrity conversations can address issues before they become widespread concerns. People often feel apprehensive about having challenging conversations, but preparation, practice and structure can help.

Applying structured frameworks and techniques to difficult decisions can be helpful methods for both organising your thoughts *and engaging with others*. For example, group exercises that prompt participants to take a particular perspective or respond to a given scenario can help to make or validate important insights on the issue at hand. Further, regularly using certain models within a team helps to normalise these conversations and build a shared reference point for identifying and working through integrity issues.

Using ethical language can help think through an issue and engage with colleagues. This is not about using jargon to complicate an issue or convey greater expertise or authority; rather, it can clarify the issue by situating it within established principles, values or expectations, such as the [APS Values](#) or [Code of Conduct](#).