

Monday, 2 August 2010

Dear Sir/ Madam

Discussion Paper on “Refining the Australian Public Service Values”

In response to the invitation to comment on the discussion paper on “Refining the Australian Public Service Values” recently issued by the Australian Public Service Commission (APSC), the Australian Institute of Management NSW & ACT (AIM) and the AIM National Policy and Research Office is pleased to provide this submission.

AIM notes and commends the proposal, contained in the *“Ahead of the Game: Blueprint for Reform of Australian Government Administration”* report, for revision of the APS values to create a smaller set of core values that are **more meaningful, memorable and effective in driving change.**

Acknowledgement and disclaimer

While the views expressed in this submission are AIM’s alone, it has been formulated following consultation with senior members (Fellows) of AIM based in Canberra including a small workshop involving Fellows from academia, large and small consulting companies, SMEs, sole traders and government departments and agencies.

We recognise that the Commission has consulted widely across Australia and we would be happy to assist in further discussion and or explanation of the development of the values through the national AIM membership and network.

What are values?

AIM’s view is that in any discussion of values there needs to be some clarity around what values actually are. One definition is:

“a collection of guiding, usually positive principles; what one deems to be correct and desirable in life, especially regarding personal conduct”.

Values must be clearly distinguished from behaviours ... and also from precepts, activities, capabilities, skill sets, and ways of working. They should have universal and continuing relevance.



Why have values?

Values enable the Australian Public Service (APS) to create a framework within which appropriate employee behaviours can be **defined** (for example in a Code of Conduct) or **inferred** (in circumstances where no prescriptive guidance is available).

Such frameworks reinforce both **consistency** and **predictability** of employee behaviour. In the APS, this benefits both APS employees themselves, and also other stakeholders (for example citizens and corporations).

AIM therefore supports the adoption of appropriate APS values as a basis for guiding the personal behaviour of APS employees.

Further, AIM is of the view that there should be an overarching obligation on APS employees to conduct themselves **diligently** in accordance with the chosen values – such an obligation would address many of the practical issues involved in scope, definition and interpretation identified in the discussion paper.

What values should be adopted by the APS?

The selection of APS values is an important factor in differentiating the APS from other organisations in the eyes of both employees, potential future employees, and other stakeholders.

Therefore, AIM's view is that the values adopted by the APS should be clearly aligned with its vision and mission.

AIM also asserts that there should be one set of APS values, and that the creation of subsidiary value sets at the individual agency level would risk diluting the strong messages inherent in a unitary APS value set – as well as being contrary to the notion of “One APS” (ie APS employees should not have to “change values” when moving between APS agencies).

Finally in this context, AIM recognises that all APS employees have a clear obligation to serve the government of the day.

How should the adopted values best be expressed?

AIM's view is that the values adopted should be simple, clear, and easy to remember.

As a guide to behaviour, they should be incapable of ambiguous interpretation. In particular, they should be specific enough to preclude the creation of “wriggle room” that could be used to justify behaviours inconsistent with their intended meaning.

Further, AIM believes that the values should be expressed in a memorable way.

A simple values set might be arranged into a mnemonic, for example as follows:

- **F**airness
- **A**ccountability
- **I**ntegrity
- **T**ransparency
- **H**onesty

In order to reduce “wriggle room”, each value should be accompanied by a clear and concise elaboration of what it is intended to mean, and examples of observable behaviours that would be consistent with it.

Issues involved in alignment of the values

AIM observes that **actual** values (which can be inferred through observable behaviours) and **expressed** values (for example those chosen to be the APS values) may diverge.

If any such divergence (misalignment) exists, and is allowed to persist, the values adopted by the APS may fall into disrepute.

“If the behaviour isn’t going to happen, the “value” isn’t a value”

Initial alignment

The risk of misalignment needs to be carefully addressed and managed at an organisational level, when values are initially being chosen.

If the actual values are not fully aligned with the chosen values, there will need to be:

- Either an ongoing process of cultural change within the APS to more closely align actual values (and observable behaviours) with the chosen values
- Or adjustment/ modification of the chosen values, in order to align them more closely with the actual values (and observable behaviours) in the APS.

Naturally if misalignment does exist, and the chosen values are considered appropriate and desirable, the former course of action is theoretically preferable. However we note that achieving cultural change across an organisation as large and complex as the APS is a significant and difficult undertaking. The choice of values must therefore be very carefully validated, so that such a process is attempted only if absolutely necessary.

Hence, values should not be chosen without detailed definition of the change in observable behaviours that is sought ... and assessment both of the **effort** involved in attempting to achieve such change, and of the **chance** that this effort might be fruitless.

By way of example, risk aversion is often remarked upon as an undesirable feature of APS culture ... and the choice of a value such as "Courage" might signal a desired culture in which risk aversion was less prevalent. AIM argues that it would be necessary to assess, up-front, the realistic **chance** that risk aversion could be reduced to the point where observable behaviours were considered consistent with the value of "Courage" ... and also the **effort** that would be required to achieve this objective.

Ongoing alignment

APS values, once chosen, should be observed by all APS employees – and modelled by every leader and manager – on an ongoing basis.

This might be encouraged, for example, by treating values-aligned behaviours as a "gate" in the performance management process – making it impossible to obtain a high performance rating unless all behavioural thresholds have been achieved.

Integration of the values, ie ensuring that they are conditional on each other, is also important. In the example above for instance, "courage" should not be rewarded alone, but only in the context of achieving all of the chosen values.

Reinforcement of the values

AIM recommends that the values be used as a positive guide for the behaviour of APS employees, and not be limited to a performance assessment tool.

AIM suggests that the values adopted by the APS should be constantly reinforced through visual cues. As well as the traditional techniques such as posters and screensavers, the values might (for example) be printed on the back of every APS employee's security pass.

AIM also suggests that the values would be further reinforced by having each and every APS employee affirm the following individual commitment:

"As an APS employee, I am personally responsible for behaving at all times in accordance with these values"

Conclusion

AIM would like to thank those Fellows who assisted in the development of this submission – and trusts that it adds constructively to current discourse on the topic of APS values.

We will be happy to convene further meetings of our members to assist the APSC directly in development of its thinking in specific relevant areas, if that would be useful.

In the meantime if you have any questions, or would like to discuss any of the matters raised in this submission further, we would be happy to discuss with you directly or with your staff.

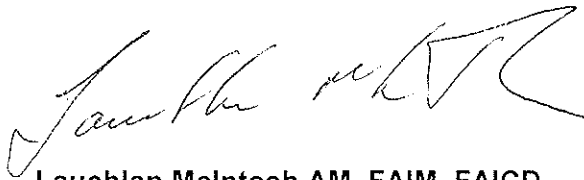
Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Greg Field', written in a cursive style.

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