

Ministerial office/public servant interaction

Submission from

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M1-09-3144.

OM10/00103

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05 JAN 2010

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## Introduction

I retired from the position of Commissioner Queensland Rural Fire Service, after 40 years as a Public Servant in various roles and with various Government agencies in New South Wales, Queensland and the Commonwealth.

- 1 *What protocols, procedures or constraints should be in place to guide ethical and mutually respectful interactions between a Minister's office and public servants.*
  - a. At interview, the process of explaining the differences between 'general and government appointments/ positions' should begin with the applicant hopefully offering some understanding and concurrence.
  - b. The culture of respect and discipline towards Ministers and their staff should be outlined including those agreed upon by the Minister's Department and their staff toward Public Servants.
  - c. The concept of 'the separation of powers' needs to be explained. This will reduce confused loyalties, blurred decision making and mixed messages between levels.
  - d. Public Servants in the past were considered 'apolitical' (I was asked to declare if I was a Card carrying member of a political party when I applied for a position with Defence in 1986). It is evident that this is not the case now and as such, the degree to which party political notions, loyalties etc. are tolerated must be outlined.
  - e. A clearly defined 'chain of command', wherein the roles and responsibilities of the most immediate linkages are outlined, explained and adhered to.
  
- 2 *How can Public Servants be empowered to challenge or question a request or direction from the minister's office that they consider to be inappropriate.*
  - a. I believe that one of the most important aspects of the current work environment is the 'dos and don'ts of computer interaction. The office policy of emails (personal/intra office, inter office) must be outlined and adhered to.  
The fact that open face to face discussion is often far more valuable to shared outcomes than a string of semi personal emails should be made clear. New Ministers and advisors need this as much as a junior!
  - b. In order to challenge question etc. I suggest the following:
    1. Staff members should initially discuss the issue with the supervisor and primarily remove all emotive statements(thoughts) and present a case based on : well prepared background, current issues, current situation and present a case where some level of negotiation is provided for all parties.

2. The supervisor may well choose to accompany the officer or at least be prepared to offer support and / or accompany the person with the issue and also be readily available for feed back from the person presenting the problem. (Immediacy is the key).

3. Ministerial staff should also adhere to correct 'chains of command' when questioning suggestions, problems raised by Public Servants.

3. *What needs to be done to ensure that public servants at all levels understand their obligation to provide independent, apolitical and impartial advice, and maintain the freedom to do so.*

a. Once an applicant is appointed the supervisor to that position should initially accept the role of mentor and /or appoint another suitable person not on the same level to mentor the appointee.

b. A culture of HONESTY from top to bottom, (this does not mean baring one's soul to all) will engender a climate of openness where people are not scared to say what they feel, need etc to do the job in hand.

c. Supervisors at all levels must accept the responsibility to ensure procedures and behaviours are complied with. Too busy, too tired etc are not acceptable excuses and will quickly become the starting point for lax office practices.

d. The 'Official language' as opposed to jargon and text shortcuts should be practised in order for full and clear understanding of the issues.

In summary it may seem 'old hat' but elements such as 'defined work ethic', honesty, trust and openness which lead to a 'happy workplace' are equally important as subject matter, degrees etc.. After all the aim is to work for the benefit of the people through the mechanisms of the elected representatives supported by Public Servants.

Thank you for this opportunity



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