

TRANSCRIPT OF PODCAST

INTEGRITY SERIES

EPISODE #2 | EXTERNAL PERSPECTIVES

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RINA BRUINSMA:

Hi everyone, and welcome to the Integrity Podcast Series, Understanding Integrity. This four-part series is brought to you via a partnership between the Institute of Public Administration Australia and the Australian Public Service Commission. My name is Rina Bruinsma. I'm the First Assistant Commissioner at the APSC. I'll begin today's podcast by acknowledging the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we are broadcasting from, the Ngunnawal people. I would like to pay my respects to the Elders past, present and emerging and acknowledge the ongoing contribution they make to the life of our country and this beautiful region.

So today's topic is External Perspectives. We are going to focus on integrity, but as it looks like from outside of the public service. We'll look a little bit more closely at how the public perceives integrity in the APS, as well as what integrity means across other sectors. We'll explore the relationship between integrity and public trust. How can we respond to challenges in this space and what opportunities are available to us.

I'm very pleased to be joined today by an excellent panel. We've got Dr Simon Longstaff, the Executive Director of The Ethics Center. Commander Jason Kennedy, Assistant Commissioner of the Australian Federal Police. And Philippa King, Deputy CEO of Austrade and former executive at National Australia Bank.

Thank you all so much for joining me today.

To begin with, some of our listeners might not actually be familiar with your roles. So, I was wondering if we could just give our listeners a quick overview of what it is you do. We might start with you Simon.

SIMON LONGSTAFF:

Well, my job for the past 30 years has been running an organisation called The Ethics Center. It provides practical support to individuals and organisations dealing with ethical questions that come before them. And includes what is still the world's only free national help line for people who've got ethical issues. Where anybody from Federal Cabinet Ministers to farmers can come to get assistance, to work through some of the complex issues they face. And finally, I have a bit of a public role to try and help people both identify and address some of the issues that come up more generally for the community.

RINA BRUINSMA:

Thanks, Simon. Jason.

JASON KENNEDY: Yeah. Thank you. I've worked with the Australian Federal Police for 27 years now, and I'm currently in charge of our professional standards area. In the AFP we investigate both compliance that we receive, as well as corruption. Vice matters as well. We not only investigate criminal matters involving our own members, but we also investigate from an administrative point of view to ensure that our members are complying with our code of conduct.

RINA BRUINSMA: Thanks, Jason. And Philippa.

PHILIPPA KING: Yeah. Hi Rina. My role is Deputy CEO at Austrade. Which is the Australian Trade and Investment Commission. So, trade and investment promotion agency of the Australian Government. And I've been in this role only a couple of months. Prior to that I was executive for Government Affairs and Public Policy at National Australia Bank, for a couple of years. And prior to that was with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade for over 20 years.

RINA BRUINSMA: Excellent. So, you've got both private sector and public sector. We'll come back to that a bit later. Thanks everyone. Simon, if I can start with you, I'm interested in your views about the role that integrity plays in shaping trust.

SIMON LONGSTAFF: Well, it's the foundation for trust, really. Integrity literally means that you are what you say you are and you do what you will say you will do. If any individual or any organisation establishes from the outset, the core values and principles by which it is going to be making judgment and then consistently acts in alignment with, that people then start to trust them. Because they say, "Well, you've said this and you're doing that. I can rely more and more upon that."

Conversely, if you say that you believe in X, but you consistently do Y, even if it's just accidentally, people say, "Well, I can't trust you because you've led me to believe this is the standard of judgment, and yet you've breached it on a continuing basis." And so it's experienced as hypocrisy. And if you're inside an organisation, that breaks the bonds of the organisation, that's like an acid that eats away at these things. And if you're outside of the organisation, you start to treat it with extreme skepticism.

RINA BRUINSMA: Thank you. I really liked what you said about... it's a good reminder. You are what you say you are and are you going to do what you said you would do? I think that's the basis of trust for us in our relationships, as well. Jason, it would be great to get your insights from the Australian Federal Police perspective. Noting the AFP operates in such a complex environment and requires a high degree of trust from both government and the Australian community.

JASON KENNEDY: Yeah. Thank you. For us particularly, because the Australian Federal Police are responsible for the enforcement of both Commonwealth and local laws. Probably the biggest thing for us, and it's a catch cry that is quite often used to my people is, doing the right thing. Integrity is doing the right thing, even when nobody's watching, which is somewhat reflective of the environment the police work in.

A lot of time, we're entrusted with making decisions around people's liberty, dealing with property, ceasing drugs and the like. And a lot of the time it's only people are working by themselves or they're working in small teams. And it's really about making sure that they have the utmost integrity from the point of view, he's doing the right thing because the members of the public, rightly so, would say, "Well, if the police can't do it, why should I do it." It really erodes the public trust in our very institution, our very constitution. And we, the police are responsible for upholding it. We really do put a really big component on that integrity part.

RINA BRUINSMA: I guess, for the police the public probably holds you to a higher standard than everyone else because you are so visibly in the spotlight there.

JASON KENNEDY: Yeah, most definitely. And that's certainly right across the board is people will always talk about and will always place the police on a pedestal. Even that goes as far as even within the Fair Work Commission. A couple of recent decisions that we've had around terminations that have been upheld, are the Fair Work Commission can even say that police are held to a higher regard.

RINA BRUINSMA: Yeah. Philippa, you've worked both in the public and private sectors. I'm interested in your thoughts about integrity from your time outside of the APS and now how that translates now that you're in the APS?

PHILIPPA KING: Yeah, sure. Do you mean by that is there a different notion of integrity? Or do you mean what's the take on integrity inside the APS from outside?

RINA BRUINSMA: Look, I'm happy for you to cover either. But I guess I was really interested from your perspective - did it change from being outside of the public sector, to being inside of the public sector, the notion of integrity and it's importance?

PHILIPPA KING: Yeah. Look, they're very similar. I think Simon put it really well. And as he was saying, it is absolutely integrity and trust is about how an organisation is perceived, right? Whether you're a bank or whether you're the Department of Foreign Affairs helping out Australians in crisis. Whether you're the Federal Police, whether you're the Trade Investment Commission helping an Australian exporter or something. I agree totally with him that it is about being clear with the community and with the Australian public, what you are and how you do things.

And also that you'll do what you say you're going to do. Whether that's government or the bank. I think a lot of the issues that the banks had post Royal Commission or through the Royal Commission, and then with the findings of that, was that there was a perception that the banks were saying that they were one thing and doing something different. And I think that integrity and trust is all about what the community's expectation is of you as an organisation. And how you go about performing that role in support of the Australian community and individuals.

RINA BRUINSMA: Thanks. I'd like to explore... I'll continue this theme a little bit with you, but what do you see as some of the unique integrity challenges for the APS?

PHILIPPA KING: Well, I think Jason's point about being held to a higher standard, definitely the case for the police, but it's right across the APS, I think. And this is part of the complexity that businesses have faced in recent times, as well. There haven't been the same standards and expectations placed on business, that the APS is used to. And there hasn't been the same level of transparency either, that the public service has become very accustomed to and business is now starting to become accustomed to.

I think it is that notion that you are held to a high standard and that community and individual expectations of what the APS can deliver for people, is very high. And it should be, it's a public institution. It's taxpayer funded. And I think people inside the APS are motivated in many ways by the fact that they're held to a high standard. And they're performing a function that is in support of the Australian community and Australia as individuals and the national interest.

I think that's the particular challenge that the APS has in terms of the public perception of the integrity and the standards to which it should be held.

RINA BRUINSMA: Thanks. Simon and Jason, any additional thoughts to add about the challenges for the APS? Let's start with you Simon.

SIMON LONGSTAFF: Yeah, I think it's not so much a challenge. I think it's something about the institutional context of the Australian Public Service. Whether it's been different in the past, I'm not sure. But at the moment, the political class, the elected politicians, have a very partial gaze, if I can put it that way. They look at the electorate and you only really get noticed perhaps if you're in a marginal seat or something of that kind. Whereas our government has to serve every single Australian, irrespective of where they happen to be located.

So, you get the strange thing in the political space, where you'll hear three Mayors before the last Federal Election, saying that they need to make themselves into marginal electorates, just to be seen. But the Australian Public Service has to have a completely impartial gaze. It needs to see every single citizen in an equal light and to treat it in that just an equitable way.

The trust that we repose in the Australian Public Service, is an essential element of government. I'll include the Federal Police in this Jason. Is absolutely critical to the actual quality, if you like the integrity, of our democracy itself. And so that puts a very particular obligation on public servants to have virtues like moral courage, to be prepared to notice and care for a citizen, even if no one necessarily wants you to.

And the more that you build, if you like, the ethical skin, that's around the public service, the more enduring it is. And it's interesting, think about this notion and scheme. If you're on a motorbike and you come off, you don't want to be your own skin, that's being dragged along the road. So, people wear leathers and that's the thing that becomes abraded. The same thing with the public service, you want to build a nice thick, ethical skin so that when it's been dragged along the roadway of life, it's got that depth and resilience to be able to cope with some of the challenges. Not for its own sake but for the sake of the community it ultimately serves.

RINA BRUINSMA: And I think you're right there, what attracts us as public servants to being in the public service, it is about service to the public. Having that mantra that we need to do what we say we will do and be what we say we will be, is really part of why many of us want to be public servants.

Jason, in terms of what you see the challenges are for the public service?

JASON KENNEDY:

For me, it's watching the COVID situation quite closely is probably that trust in government and what we're having at the moment saying to the public, "We need to vaccinated, we need to reach those 80% rates to open up the country." But you have then got misinformation right across social media and the like. In some sense that good, strong, moral fiber and that trust in government and institutions, allows you to cut through that misinformation because people have trust. They've got previous dealings that actually say, "I do trust this institution. I trust that. Not just what I'm just reading on Facebook or what I've just seen elsewhere."

I think those days where the news cycles are pretty much 24/7 now, there's actually a lot of chaff to get through in order to really get the correct information out there and to be able to break through. I think that's where the trust is really important because people need to have a benchmark of where that trust comes from. That's a challenge that I see right across the public service government and even in a policing sense, as well.

RINA BRUINSMA:

And certainly that's very different in Australia to what it currently is in other countries like the United States at the moment. Where I think in Australia, we are coming to government for the source of truth, rather than Facebook, but we've got to maintain that, don't we.

I'll talk now about opportunities. I'm interested in understanding what we can learn from outside of the APS? Jason, you've noted that the AFP invest heavily in maintaining trust and works closely with APS agencies. Do you have thoughts on opportunities for the APS? And what's worked well for the AFP?

JASON KENNEDY:

For the AFP, we've got a strong integrity framework. From the very first day that public join the AFP, they're inducted into what our framework looks will and we've got a multifaceted framework. More often than not, people look at our professional standards area, are just investigators who just investigate corruption and complaints. Whereas for us, it's a lot more than that. And a lot of work that I've been doing in the last 12 months that I've been in this role, is really getting out there and educating our workforce. Because a lot of the time our people don't really understand where the conflicts of interest are. They don't understand the moral dilemmas or the ethical dilemmas that exist in policing and what it means to be held up on that higher pedestal of trust from the public.

We've actually created a cradle-to-grave training. We only ever used to give training at the beginning. Whereas now, we tend to give that training right through from the recruits and new member induction, right through to different points throughout their career of what integrity and ethics and professional standards mean. Not only as a team member, but now as a team leader, as an executive member, in certain roles and likes.

We're getting people to think about professional standards and integrity is being something front of mind. And it's just something that becomes normal. For us, it's the prevention. I really try and put the ambulance at the top of the cliff, rather than at the bottom. For me, the further people fall, the harder it is to bring them back.

For me, that education prevention piece is really about just telling people where the pitfalls are and providing them the opportunities. We have a very strong integrity recording, even security incident reporting save. For whatever reason, they think their integrity may be in question somewhere, or someone's asked a question of them, they can at least report it to us so we're aware and we can at least put something around it to mitigate whatever it is.

We've got systems in place around the detection of where things might not be right. And obviously we put investigations to that and look for learnings, and also seek to find the truth. And out of that, we then have the continual improvement so there's a continuous recirculation of our lessons back into the workforce. But for us, it's really about making sure our members do the right thing all the time. And supporting them to understand where those dilemmas and the like. And how they then manage that for that reporting framework. That's how the AFP does it.

RINA BRUINSMA:

Thank you. That reminds me of, in our first series, the Australian Public Service Commissioner, Peter Woolcott mentioned that developing and understanding an awareness of integrity is something that we all have a responsibility for. And it's a lifelong habit. You can learn it and you can exercise it so that when you're faced with a dilemma, you actually know what to do.

And you were talking about admitting when there has been a breach of some sort of integrity. Having the trust within the organisation to be able to go to your supervisor or manager and tell them what's happening and address it and nip it in the bud right there and then. Philippa, any thoughts that you might have on the opportunities for the APS?

PHILIPPA KING:

Yeah, I think we're at a really interesting point at the moment. Because to my mind, going back to Simon's point, that integrity is about doing what you say you're going to do to. To me, it's also about delivering and there is a really unique opportunity given everything that's happened over the last couple of years, with COVID. We're in a situation now where the APS really has quite an extraordinary capacity to deliver for Australians.

Whether it's stabilising the economy, whether it is achieving that vaccine roll out and getting those numbers right up. Whether it's helping small businesses stay afloat until things get going again. The breadth and scope of the decision-making throughout the APS, as a result of the pandemic, has been quite extraordinary.

I think the public has seen that. I know from working in a big corporate during most of the pandemic, that that was really acknowledged very strongly at the bank. The extent to which the APS was having to respond and act in the interest of all Australians. And in fact, it was a really good opportunity for the bank to, to work closely with the government. The reality is if you're doing that, and you are actually delivering with professionalism, that has a huge impact in terms of the public's trust. Not just on the APS, but on private organisations and community organisations. And it's not just about delivering, it's about the way you deliver. Deliver with professionalism, deliver with transparency, so that you're consulting with the right people, that you're taking people's interests into account and you're making it clear that that's what you're doing.

I think actually at the moment, the opportunity for the APS to really demonstrate the professionalism with which it can achieve things and deliver for Australians is actually quite a significant opportunity that we've got and will continue to have for some time, I think. And it's really important, all the things that Jason is saying about that institutional capability and making sure that that is the framework with which people are acting and taking decisions is incredibly important just because the breadth and scope of APS activities is so much broader, than it has been in the past.

RINA BRUINSMA:

Thanks, Philippa. Simon, where do you see the opportunities for the APS?

SIMON LONGSTAFF: Really building upon what the others have already said. The first thing I think is that the Australian Public Service was along with most other institutions in Australia for a period of time, drawn down into the black hole of compliance as being its principal response to the challenge of integrity. And so it was around rules and their enforcement and surveillance systems and things of that kind. And what we now know is that that does not work. It's not just that it's unpleasant, but it's largely ineffective, in comparison to creating cultures in which people voluntarily want to do the right thing in the way that Jason was talking about it.

But to do that, you've got to be prepared to do a couple of other things. But firstly, I think there's a huge opportunity to go beyond merely the rhetoric, but improve the reality about delegation, where you actually allow people to make decisions. And of course, for the police, the exercise of discretion goes very much to the old ancient, the role of the constable and that's an essential element. But for other people, and including in some parts of the Commonwealth Public Service, they'll talk the game about discretion or delegation, but they won't actually allow it because people are genuinely afraid that if they make a mistake, the roof will fall in on them.

And so I think there's an opportunity in the public service to be a little bit more generous with each other about the ability to make a mistake. And that's already been mentioned by Phillipa about how you should be able to come forward and talk about that. But I'd reframe it in one last way, which I think is a huge opportunity. We've got used to speaking in recent years about having the benefits of a so-called speak-up culture, but I've increasingly come to be worried about that term.

I think it makes it sound like it is a dangerous thing to do. And you have to rally yourself to speak up. I'm far more interested in a culture of curiosity. Whereas a normal part of an organisational life, people can say, "Hang on, we say this, but we do that. And I don't understand the inconsistency." Which goes back to where we were talking before about the definition of integrity.

And that merely by being curious about why we do what we do and how it aligns with statements around purpose, values and principles, you can unleash the ability of people to make responsible decisions and to wonder about their workplace without it necessarily being a fearsome thing to do. I think if we could shift in the public service, both the reality around delegation and the movement from the speak-up to curiosity, both of those things would significantly advance the agenda around integrity.

RINA BRUINSMA: Thanks, Simon. And thank you to all our panel members today. I'll just do a little bit of a summary, of our external insights. Some of the things that I've heard and I'll take with me after this. We've talked about that integrity is the very foundation of trust. And I liked what you said, Simon, "You are what you say you are, and you do what you said you were going to do." That is how you build trust.

SIMON LONGSTAFF: Even when no one's looking.

RINA BRUINSMA: Even when no one's looking. That's absolutely right. And reflecting on the fact that it was something like COVID-19 has put us all to the test, has put the public sector to the test. People are watching, they are looking at how we respond. I'd really like to encourage all of our listeners to think about that culture of curiosity. So we shouldn't be afraid. And we shouldn't think about integrity as this scary thing or speaking up as a scary thing. We should actually empower our staff to speak frankly, in a safe environment and in an environment of trust.

Thank you to all of the speakers today. We've really welcomed your insights and experience. And thank you to all of those who are listening to us. I hope you enjoyed hearing from the panel. Our next integrity series is entitled Oversight Agencies. I hope you'll join me. Goodbye for now.

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