



TRAINING

International

REBUILDING TRUST IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR: BACK TO THE FUTURE OR A BRAVE NEW WORLD?

By Tanya Karlebach and Neil McCallum



‘What does an ethical public sector look like in the second decade of the 21st Century? More importantly, how does it act?’


In this article, we argue that the idea of what the public sector is for in many countries has not markedly changed for decades and that a set of ethical standards, originally codified a quarter of a century ago, still hold sway. Yet the world has changed profoundly and forever. We suggest there is a crisis of confidence in the public sector and propose a dialogue on the way trust can be rebuilt.



Forty years ago, ideas about what the public sector is for changed radically and forever. For the preceding 4 decades, most western democracies agreed with their totalitarian rivals that if you really wanted something urgent, big or hard done, you entrusted it to the public sector. The public sector won wars, educated the young, cared for the sick, delivered the post and ran the railways.

But with the election of Margaret Thatcher in the UK in 1979 and just 18 months later, of Ronald Reagan in the USA, a new, markedly less positive view of public service emerged: one which has pretty much remained unchanged to this day. This was promulgated by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, reflected in countless Structural Adjustment Programmes around the world over the succeeding decades. From national saviour and nation builder, the public sector was recast as 'a necessary evil. "Bloated, inefficient and unresponsive". No longer hailed as the service deliverer of choice but now decried as a barrier to economic growth, individual improvement and a nation's capacity to embrace the new. Vast areas of the public sector were privatised. That which remained was progressively shrunk and encouraged to emulate commercial approaches and attitudes.

Within a decade this reorientation had led to a clash of, and crisis in, values. What worked for businesses, with the overarching imperative of profit generation, could and often did look pretty inappropriate in a public sector setting. Scandals and hasty resignations followed, and by the mid-1990s, reviews and inquiries led to clear statements of public sector values that have been institutionalised in the establishment of codes of conduct and remained largely unchanged to this day.



Where are we now?


Whilst principles such as integrity, selflessness and accountability may not have changed, the world to which they are being applied certainly has. Perhaps therefore we need to ask if the way in which those values are evidenced has changed and if the assumptions on which they are based may no longer apply.

These assumptions include:

- A clear distinction between an official's public role and their private life
- A widely understood delineation between politics and public administration
- An independent and generally respected judiciary
- A limited number of media outlets and modes of communication

It is perhaps the latter of these that has the most profound impact. The famous seven principles of public life in the UK which have been replicated in numerous countries, the Nolan Principles, were crafted long before social media. Even before Hotmail! Hence the subtitle of this article: **'Back to the Future or a Brave New World?'**

Are there abiding fundamental principles which underpin and ethical public service to which we need to return, or are we in such a radically different place that we need to look again at what integrity and accountability mean today and going forward? What does an ethical public sector look like in the second decade of the 21st Century? More importantly, how does it act?



Understanding Public Trust today

An OECD study in 2019 indicated that only 45% of citizens trusted their government and this figure will only have grown over the last 12 months as governments around the world have faced unprecedented challenges, and not always with the best outcomes. This trend matters as trust is the core of a successful citizen/state relationship. The absence of trust brings into question the legitimacy of public institutions and challenges social cohesion. Lower levels of trust result in less compliance with regulations and taxation causing a direct impact on the ability of the government to fulfil its role.

Trust in government has two major components: Values and Competence. The former can be seen as the aspirational principles within which the government operates, and the latter broadly relates to the effectiveness of governments in delivering services. Put simply: Doing the right thing and doing the thing right.

COMPONENT	DIMENSION	DEFINITION
Competence: <i>ability of governments to deliver to citizens the services they need, at the quality level they expect</i>	Responsiveness	The provision of accessible, efficient and citizen-oriented public services that effectively address the needs and expectations of people, and evolve over time along with these needs.
	Reliability	The ability of governments to minimise uncertainty in the economic, social and political environment facing people, and to act in a consistent and predictable manner in responding to this uncertainty.
Values: <i>drivers and principles that inform and guide government action</i>	Integrity	The alignment of public institutions with broader principles and standards of conduct in order to safeguard the public interest while mitigating the risk of corruption.
	Openness/Inclusiveness	The extent to which relevant information is shared with citizens in an accessible and usable manner, actions and plans are transparent and a comprehensive approach to interact with stakeholders is in place.
	Fairness	The consistent treatment of citizens and business in policymaking and policy implementation.

Source: OECD (2017a)



Trust is eroded when individuals and organisations perceive that:

- service delivery is ineffective
- the government stated objectives and targets go unmet
- governments are unable to respond to disruptions
- decision-making is conducted in secret
- unfair advantages are given to select individuals and organisations

Any one of these issues can damage the relationship, but over the last year, many governments have had multiple instances of all these. As governments look to kick-start economies coming out of the pandemic it will be critical to address these perceptions and rebuild that trust. Now, we believe, is the time to start on this.

Rebuilding Trust

Our approach to this challenge is to:

- define and address country-specific trust issues (e.g. is it service delivery, a perception of 'chumocracy' or lack of transparency?)
- embed integrity and trust into rebuilding strategies
- demonstrate ethical leadership
- communicate values and challenge poor behaviour
- align policy and adjust procedures to:
 - support the values
 - manage expectations (e.g setting realistic targets)
 - minimising opportunities for unethical behaviour
 - improve the transparency of decision-making
 - decrease opportunities for 'special deals'
 - promote transparency and challenge confidentiality requirements
 - establish clear channels for reporting and managing integrity lapses

Now is the time to start rebuilding trust in public services with an ethical infrastructure fit for purpose in the world we currently inhabit and the one which will emerge over the coming years. We can learn from the problems of the recent past to create a set of policies and procedures which will support a culture of ethical working. This will involve preserving the best of the past whilst embracing the opportunities of the new.

On March 24th 2:00 pm GMT, Tanya Karlebach and Neil McCallum will be hosting a Webinar on the topic 'Rebuilding Trust in the Public Sector: Back to the Future or a Brave New World'. It will be of interest to those responsible and accountable for the ethics and integrity in public life, and/or who are responsible for scrutinising these components. We invite you to attend and take part in what will sure to be a lively debate of perspectives and solutions.

[Register here for free.](#)

**Contact the Dods Training team
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