

Introduction

As part of an Australian Taxation Office (ATO) wide site leadership strategy, the Albury leadership team runs a work group program which brings interested leaders from across the site together to address issues and themes that contribute to building a unified work culture and productive site environment.

This submission has been developed by interested members of the Albury values working group and the graduate mentoring group. It does not represent an official response from the ATO, or from the Albury site leadership group as a whole.

Our submission is focussed on the Chapter 4 questions

- Should the APS values be streamlined?
- What values do you consider should be included in a revised set of APS values?
- How do we ensure that APS leaders fulfil their responsibilities to promote and uphold the values?

The ATO has a separate set of value statements in addition to the APS Values, and we reflected particularly on the paragraph on page 25 of the Reform paper stating:

‘...the existence of agency specific values in some places indicates that local rather than core APS values are becoming the guiding philosophy within each individual organisation. Furthermore the APS values themselves do not highlight some of the principles and ideals employees in a modern public service should be working toward – the need to work collaboratively to achieve cross-portfolio outcomes, is one example.’

Our discussion ranged across the purpose and impact of value statements, the ideal of a unified, outwardly focussed public service and our current perceptions of our position as APS or ATO. In particular we compared and contrasted the APS and ATO values, discussed the impact of having two separate sets, and shared our experiences of ‘making the values real’.

For the benefit of readers who may not be familiar with the two sets of values they are reproduced on the following page:

Current APS Values, Section 10 of the Public Service Act 1999

The Australian Public Service:

- a. is apolitical, performing its functions in an impartial and professional manner
- b. is a public service in which employment decisions are based on merit
- c. provides a workplace that is free from discrimination and recognises and utilises the diversity of the Australian community it serves
- d. has the highest ethical standards
- e. is openly accountable for its actions, within the framework of Ministerial responsibility to the Government, the Parliament and the Australian public
- f. is responsive to the Government in providing frank, honest, comprehensive, accurate and timely advice and in implementing the Government's policies and programs
- g. delivers services fairly, effectively, impartially and courteously to the Australian public and is sensitive to the diversity of the Australian public
- h. has leadership of the highest quality
- i. establishes workplace relations that value communication, consultation, co-operation and input from employees on matters that affect their workplace
- j. provides a fair, flexible, safe and rewarding workplace
- k. focuses on achieving results and managing performance
- l. promotes equity in employment
- m. provides a reasonable opportunity to all eligible members of the community to apply for APS employment
- n. is a career-based service to enhance the effectiveness and cohesion of Australia's democratic system of government
- o. provides a fair system of review of decisions taken in respect of employees.

Current ATO Values

- Being fair and professional
- Applying the rule of law
- Supporting those who want to do the right thing and being fair, but firm, with those who don't
- Being consultative, collaborative and willing to co-design
- Being open and accountable
- Being responsive to challenges and opportunities

The ATO values are supported by more detailed descriptions and behaviour statements.

Should the values be streamlined?

The brief answer is yes, the values need to be re-thought and streamlined if they are to fill the function of underpinning a unified values driven culture for the APS of the future.

People generally conceptualise 'values' as simple concepts that need little explanation because their meaning is commonly understood – for example 'honesty', 'fairness'. Our personal values underpin our behaviour: we judge our responses to circumstances with reference to them – most often automatically. The process of evaluating our behaviour or someone else's behaviour against the value is subliminal unless we sense a values-behaviour conflict which brings conscious thought about them. You could say that 'values' serve as a mnemonics to which are attached perceptions about lots of different behavioural expectations and circumstances.

Thus, while, people felt that the current APS values were not at odds with their own personal values, they also felt they are too detailed to be memorable and too specific to particular circumstances to perform this 'underpinning' role. The ATO values were seen as better in that they were more directly relevant to their circumstances: they are compatible with the APS values but point to what is most relevant to ATO staff.

Nevertheless several people commented the values (APS or ATO) were very rarely a topic of overt discussion and in their day to day roles people tended to rely on their own values, and on the specific rules or behaviour expectations for their issue or circumstance –e.g. service standards, practice statements, agency agreement. These rules of course are built on and aligned with the APS and ATO values but this reinforces the idea that the values themselves do not need to contain behavioural descriptions.

Participants also discussed the reason for, and impact of separate values in addition to the APS values – as for example in the ATO. While the ATO values were seen as being useful in that they focus specifically on ATO circumstances, it was generally agreed that in the interest of creating symbolic unity, it would be preferable if a single set of APS (simple) values was then supported by alternative documents – e.g. charters, compacts etc. rather than further sets of 'values'. Interestingly, a majority of participants said they currently thought of themselves as ATO officers, not as members of the APS.

What values do you consider should be included in a revised set of APS values?

To be effective in underpinning a common APS culture, the APS values should have the same level of simplicity and broad applicability to all circumstances that our personal values have.

Under the heading 'What is required for high performance' in the discussion paper there are a number of statements that contain the kind of words that could form the basis of a simple set of values for the APS. These include

- Unity
- Excellence
- Fairness
- Integrity

- Transparency
- Accountability

That list may not be complete: for example participants in our discussions identified that our values should emphasise our intention to behave inclusively and collaboratively, including consulting externally both with the community and other agencies. A point was also made that the APS values should include some reference to how we treat each other, as APS employees. Though it could be argued that the types of behaviour expected in both external and internal relationships are intrinsically elements of 'fairness'.

Exactly what the value statements should contain should ultimately be decided by considering the outcomes they are intended to achieve. This is discussed further below.

How do we ensure that APS leaders fulfil their responsibilities to promote and uphold the values?

Attempts to ensure that leaders (and APS staff in general) uphold the current values seem to have resulted in many additional layers of behavioural descriptors and rules. For example the current APS value statements actually express behavioural expectations, and are further supported by other documents such as the Code of Conduct. The ATO value statements are supported by behavioural descriptions that are specific to ATO circumstances. And then of course there are all the charters, agreements, practice statements, etc. etc.

Experience has shown that people do not easily translate our current values to their own particular circumstances. They may for example find it difficult to understand exactly how to apply the rule of law in a way that is supportive of those who want to do the right thing. Some of our current values are also open to different interpretation – for example what is 'the highest ethical standards' or 'leadership of the highest quality'.

People did feel the additional material such as codes of conduct, behavioural descriptors, practice statements etc. are helpful and sometimes necessary, but also recognised the future success of the APS depends on people being able to make principle or values driven decisions in novel circumstances where no rules currently exist.

Participants felt that the most effective way to achieve a shift toward values driven behaviour is through more conversation. For example the creation of a new cross agency 'hub' could include involving participants in a compact or charter discussion and setting out simple principle-based behavioural expectations; leaders could overtly link decisions to values.

Measuring and reporting comparative success is a well recognised strategy to improve performance and might help ensure our leaders promote and uphold the values.

But in this context measurement requires additional thought which needs to start a few steps back from judging the individual or group performance of leaders.

Participants in our discussions identified that before we could determine whether the values themselves are appropriate or useful etc., we needed to understand the purpose for which they are created and what would show us that the values and the way they are applied is having the desired impact.

Building common understanding of the outcomes expected from a values-driven culture – for example through applying effectiveness methodology processes would allow us to judge more critically how the revised set of value statements should be constructed, and what strategies might help embed them. Whether it is appropriate for agencies to supplement overarching values with additional values relevant to their own circumstances, and how the value statements should be supported and embedded into the culture would also depend on our conclusion about why we need value statements. Looking at the impact on outcomes leaders achieve through their values leadership and learning from and building on outstanding contributions would be more useful than the individual activity-based measurement (e.g. did you run values workshops for your staff).

Conclusion

In summary, the key ideas that emerged from our forum are:

- We need firstly to understand what outcomes we intend to produce by creating a new set of values
- The value statements should be simple and easily incorporated into people's thinking.
- Behavioural descriptors that are relevant to people's circumstances are useful but should not be overdone: people need to be equipped to make values-based judgements where rules do not exist.
- Conversation and strategies such as creating simple compacts or charters directly relevant to particular groups or circumstances will be useful in ensuring people have a common understanding of how the values relate to their everyday work.
- Applying effectiveness methodology including developing a common understanding of outcomes desired, potential strategies, and outcome based evaluation could help support leaders to promote and uphold the values.