

# Training module for Government Communications Practitioners

# What this module covers

- the definition of the public service communications function
- the key principles in the Standards of Integrity and Code of Conduct and the Public Relations Institute Code of Ethics
- relevant parts of the Cabinet Manual 2008
- e-government guidelines

# 1. The public sector communications function: a definition

*Enables* the effective flow of information and ideas

*between* an agency

and its internal and external publics

*to facilitate* participation, service delivery and informed decision-making,

*and to build* accountability and trust in government

# The public sector communications function: a definition (continued)

*This is achieved* by  
developing, delivering and evaluating  
public agency communications  
*based on* good practice  
communications techniques  
*supported by* the principles of integrity  
and neutrality of the public service

# Rationale

Effective communication enables an informed and participating public:



# Review task 1

Familiarise yourself again with the definition of the public service communications function and reflect on your organisation's role and purpose before you discuss the following:

- *What information and ideas does your organisation need to communicate?*
- *What audiences does it need to communicate with?*
- *Why are these audiences important?*
- *How would effective communication be achieved?*
- *How do you evaluate your communications?*
- *Discuss whether your public is really informed and participating.*
- *What two key public service principles support the delivery of the public service communications function?*

## 2. The Public Sector Standards of Integrity and Conduct

The **Standards of Integrity and Conduct** is issued by the State Services Commissioner under the State Sector Act 1988, s 57

It says that we must be **fair, impartial, responsible** and **trustworthy**

**State servants** must comply with the code and public organisations must maintain policies and procedures that are consistent with it

**Read the code** at [www.ssc.govt.nz/code](http://www.ssc.govt.nz/code)

The following slides cover the main points.

# Fairness in communications

Treat  
everyone  
fairly and with  
respect

- Play the ball (the issue), not the person
- Don't patronise or make fun of people, particularly in respect of race, gender, religion etc
- Don't bend facts to suit your purpose
- Do make communications easily available to everyone
- Don't favour one service provider above another
- Match message tone and content respectfully to your audience
- Don't play journalists off against each other – try to treat them equally

# Case study 1

## **Broadcasting Standards Authority complaint**

On 24 September 2009 *Talkback with Michael Laws* on Radio Live featured an interview with MP Hone Harawira about his opinion that tobacco should be phased out as a legal product. During the programme, Mr Laws made the following comments:

“Yesterday I gave you the comment of, you know, the slightly racist Māori educator by the name of Boyd who works for the Counties Manukau District Health Board who believes that it’s all a white plot... One of the things I’d love a Māori caller to tell me this morning is why do Māori smoke? And why is the message not getting through? And would it work with you if you do what Boyd at the Counties Manukau District Health Board clearly does, and he tells clients that it’s all a Pakeha plot to kill Māori. Would that stop you? Well having said that yet again, and this so-called smoking educator in the Counties Manukau Health Board is a classic example. I think a lot of them try and shift responsibility again. And maybe, you know what I mean, so, it’s not your fault you’re smoking, it’s a white man’s plot.”

The Broadcasting Standards Authority found that Mr Broughton was treated unfairly because his views were misrepresented in a way that portrayed him in an unfairly negative light.

# Fairness in communications

Be  
professional  
and responsive

- Base your communications on good practice communications techniques
- Don't keep people – whether journalists, the public, or your own staff or CE - waiting for a response
- Be available - or ensure someone else is available - at all times
- Keep a calm, professional demeanour, even under pressure
- Dress the part
- Keep your standards high in speech and publication
- Keep up with new communications ideas and developments
- Measure what you do and what impact it has, using up-to-date techniques

# Case study 2

## Reviews of Civil Defence tsunami response

Civil Defence Minister John Carter released reports of internal and external reviews into the Ministry of Civil Defence's response to the 30 September 2009 tsunami alert.

"Overall, the reviews show the response to the tsunami threat was good, but make a number of recommendations to improve future responses. That includes timely and co-ordinated communication with the media, which are important public conduits in the event of a civil defence operation," says Mr Carter.

The independent review stated: "The Public Information Management function of the Ministry of Civil Defence and Emergency Management underperformed ...it delivered too little authoritative public messaging in the first two hours of the ... response."

"The various ways in which the PIM function underperformed had a cumulative effect on media coverage of the response. Frustration about process begat scepticism, first about coherence, then about competence – an impression reinforced by the arrival of the pictures of the Samoan devastation before New Zealand authorities felt able to confirm it officially. The system's credibility was undermined because it was not delivering authoritative messages coherently."

# Fairness in communications

Work to make government services accessible and effective

- Use appropriate media channels
- Measure how accessible and effective your communications are
- Make links with other government entities wherever possible
- Provide translations and special communications for those who don't have English as their first language
- Don't assume everyone has access to the internet and broadband yet
- Be transparent in communications

# Fairness in communications

Strive to make a difference to the wellbeing of New Zealand and all its people

- Focus on the outcomes you deliver – how do your overall goals make a difference?
- Measure your results and feed them back into your actions
- Keep your communications connected to Government's overarching goals
- Be inclusive in your audiences

# Impartiality in communications

## Maintain political neutrality

- Respect the authority of the government of the day
- Don't let your personal beliefs colour your communications
- Always keep communications politically unbiased
- Never publicly criticise or undermine a present or past government, or politicians
- Play the ball (the issue) not the person
- Enable your organisation to work with both current and future governments
- Provide robust and unbiased communications to Ministers

# Case study 3

## **From Matthew Hooton's column on Public Service neutrality:**

When he was trade minister, Lockwood Smith found that invariably the junior diplomats in our overseas posts had burned him in effigy a few years earlier when he was education minister and they were student protesters. Smith was amused rather than offended. Old war stories could be swapped over dinner when the trade negotiations were done.

Winston Peters must know that many of his foreign affairs officials deplore his domestic agenda, but those same officials report that he behaves with the utmost courtesy and professionalism in all his dealings with his department.

Perhaps jet-setting foreign-policy ministers become more cosmopolitan and tolerant of political differences, but that does not explain why, as social welfare minister, the more aggressively partisan Roger Sowry worked entirely professionally with senior officials Vera Smith, who stood for Labour the previous election, and Alison Timms, whose husband Tony was a long-standing general secretary of the Labour Party and, at the time, was opposition leader Helen Clark's right-hand man.

In 2000, I helped Margaret Wilson's Labour Department communicate the Employment Relations Act to employers. Wilson, I'm told, was very happy with the work. Biosecurity New Zealand, I hope, received value when I reviewed their communications after the 2005 Waiheke Island foot and mouth scare.

Smith, Goff, Sutton, Peters, Sowry and Wilson are very different people, but they are all professionals. They understand that the departments for which they are temporarily responsible are not extensions of their political machines. However important they may think their work is, they know that one day they will be replaced, potentially by someone from a different party. In the meantime, they meet their obligations to protect their department's reputation for integrity and independence, to ensure any future government will also have confidence in its work.

# Responsible and trustworthy communications

Be objective,  
careful,  
honest,  
lawful and  
trustworthy

- Communicate lawfully and objectively
- Use communications, information and resources carefully and only for intended purposes
- Work to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of communications
- Always be honest in communications
- Work to the best of your abilities
- Don't misuse your position for personal gain
- Decline gifts or benefits that place you under obligation or perceived influence
- Avoid any activities, work or non-work, that may harm your organisation's reputation or that of the State Services

# Case study 4

## **The Dominion Post Editorial: “Truth goes with the Territory” (2009)**

On January 30, a Dominion Post reporter emailed a request to ... the manager of strategic communications at the Internal Affairs Department. It was a simple request. Could he inform her which former members of the Clark government had yet to return the self-drive vehicles assigned to ministers for their personal use.

[He] replied: "All cars are now sold, back or under our control." A follow-up question elicited a similar answer. Other news organisations received similar responses to similar queries.

However, it subsequently emerged [he] had, to put it politely, been economical with the facts. At least one vehicle assigned to a former minister had not been sold, had not been returned to the department and was not under the control of the ministry.

About the time he was assuring this newspaper that there were no outstanding issues to do with the return of ministerial vehicles, the four-wheel-drive Ford Territory assigned to Winston Peters for his personal use while a minister was photographed outside the Auckland home of Mr Peters' partner, Jan Trotman.

As departmental emails obtained by a blogger have since established, [the communications manager] was aware a photograph had been taken by a fourth news organisation but that did not prevent him dispatching a self-congratulatory message to a colleague that afternoon: "I have managed, I think, to get TVNZ, TV3 and The DomPost to terminate their interest in this non-story." He added a cynical coda: "We have to hope for someone famous to do something embarrassing."

# Review task 2

- *Name four principles from the Public Sector Standards of Integrity and Conduct*
- *Give an example of good communications practice under each principle*
- *Give an example of poor communications practice under each principle*

# 4. The Cabinet Manual 2008

The **Cabinet Manual** is the authoritative guide to central government decision making for those working in government

It says that we must be **fair, impartial, responsible** and **trustworthy**

**Public servants** must comply with the code and public organisations must maintain policies and procedures that are consistent with it

This training module is not all-inclusive: the following slides refer to relevant sections of the **Cabinet Manual** which you can find at [www.cabinetmanual.cabinetoffice.govt.nz](http://www.cabinetmanual.cabinetoffice.govt.nz)

# Conflicts of interest

Be aware of  
the rules  
around  
Ministers'  
conflicts of  
interest  
(chapter 2)

- Don't draw the Minister into associations with NGOs or community groups whose objectives conflict with government, who are a lobby group, or receive government funding
- Don't encourage gifts to Ministers from NGOs, commercial organisations, or cultural gifts that could create perceptions of conflict of interest or double dipping
- Avoid Ministerial promotion or endorsement of companies or products in speeches or photos

# Government advertising

## Be aware of guidelines around advertising (Appendix B)

- Public funds must not be used for party political purposes
- Be accurate, factual, truthful, fair, honest, impartial, lawful and proper
- Use reasonable and fair procedures for tendering and employment of consultants
- Brief factual information may be sent unsolicited to the public
- Only advertise where there is an identifiable and justifiable information need
- Clearly attribute your organisation on any advertising

# Relationship with Minister

If you work  
with a Minister,  
know the rules  
and roles  
(Chapter 3)

- Follow a 'no surprises' principle
- Be aware of the separation of roles and responsibilities between CE and Minister
- Keep your CE informed of any contact with the Minister
- Establish whether you or the Minister's office will handle media or make public comment on a particular issue

# Confidentiality

## Know what is confidential about Cabinet processes (Chapter 5)

- Discussion at Cabinet and Cabinet Committee meetings is confidential
- Contents and details of the legislative programme are confidential and subject to the Official Information Act
- Do not disclose proposals likely to be considered in future unless as part of a Cabinet-approved consultation process
- Do not disclose decisions before the Government itself does
- Do not disclose the nature or content of individual Ministers' or officials' views expressed at the meetings

# Case study 5

In March 2010 the State Services Commission launched an inquiry into two unauthorised disclosures of information relating to Cabinet papers on state sector restructuring and mining on conservation land.

Ian Rennie, State Services Commissioner said: "The unauthorised release of Government information has the potential to seriously undermine trust in the Public Service. It is critical that we thoroughly investigate these breaches and act on any findings to ensure confidence in the system is maintained."

"Ministers need to be able to continue to trust us to work with them around issues that can at times be difficult, and I expect public servants to follow good systems and practices that enable decisions to be made in an appropriately confidential manner."

Mr Rennie said he would advise chief executives of the need to have systems and procedures in place to ensure that government information, including Cabinet material, was protected securely, and not disclosed except in accordance with authorised procedures.

# Collective responsibility

Respect the principle of collective decision making (Chapter 5)

- Once a decision is reached by Cabinet, particularly on a matter where agencies hold different views, comments in public should reflect the fact that a collective government decision has been made, and be factual and neutral

# General Elections

Plan major  
comms  
initiatives away  
from elections  
(Chapter 6 &  
Appendix B)

- Ministers' decision-making ability may be limited 3 months before and up to 2 months after an election
- Don't run media ads in the 3 months before an election to avoid perceptions of publicity for party politics
- Respect a change of Ministers – a Minister you had a good relationship with may now be the opposition
- Take care with OIA requests that may need consultation with the incoming Minister
- During formation of a government there are special rules around giving information to negotiating parties – check with the SSC

# Consultation

## Support consultation with good comms (Chapter 7)

- Follow best practice in consultation on legislation and regulations
- Failure to meet statutory obligations to consult could result in regulations being overturned by the Courts
- Draft legislation at all stages – even old drafts – are confidential and must not be released without Ministerial approval
- Detailed information on consultation processes is in the CabGuide on the Cabinet Office website
- Consider publicising a law change wider than just the *New Zealand Gazette*

# Select Committees

Select  
committees  
are special –  
take care  
(Chapter 7)

- Do not make submissions or give information to a select committee without Ministerial approval
- Always involve other departments if it looks like they might have an interest
- Be aware that any documents – even notes - you take to a select committee meeting can be demanded by them
- Find out who sits on the Committee on the day your CE fronts up; practise likely questions
- Take staff who will present to a select committee to see the room first
- Remember journalists can be present at some sessions – find out which
- If you have to provide copies of documents, do so through the Select Committee clerk – don't hand them out on the spot
- The Official Information Act can be used to assess whether information should be withheld from select committees

# Official Information Act

Treat official information with care and protect it from unauthorised release  
(Chapter 8)

- Journalists are increasingly using the OIA to access information to make a story
- Know what you can release and withhold under the OIA, Privacy Act and Public Records Act
- Only Ministers can approve release of Cabinet material
- Take care with commercially sensitive information, especially if the company is listed on the stock exchange – avoid influencing or misleading the market (Securities Markets Act 1988)

# Case study 6

As reported by The Dominion Post, September 2009:

- **2009:** A Treasury official dropped her notebook containing secret details about a possible new super-spy agency in a busy street outside Parliament, where it was found by a journalist. The blunder revealed top-level talks on whether the Secret Intelligence Service, the Government Communications Security Bureau and the External Assessments Bureau should be merged to cut costs. Details about police and the Corrections Department were also in the notebook.
- **2008:** Corrections suffered a security breach after a file of personal information on high-risk offenders released into the community was found on an Auckland street.
- **2006:** Labour's big Budget secret plans to regulate Telecom are blown when a messenger in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet passes documents he was supposed to shred to a mate in the company.
- **1982:** An SIS agent left his briefcase containing a pie, a Penthouse magazine and his notebook, in Wellington's Bolton St. It was found by the son of a parliamentary reporter and made news around the world.

# Review task 3

- *What kind of gifts can your Minister accept from NGOs?*
- *List three things you need to be aware of around a General Election when planning your communications*
- *What guidelines are there around employment of consultants?*
- *Why are things that happen in Cabinet confidential, like how Ministers vote or what views officials hold?*
- *What select committee does your organisation get called to? Who sits on it? What are their interests?*
- *Why should you protect commercially sensitive information about a company listed on the Stock Exchange?*

# E-government

Using information  
and technology  
across government  
in new, more  
collaborative ways  
[www.e.govt.nz](http://www.e.govt.nz)

- Promote the electronic delivery of government services and information on the internet, and online participation
- Maintain the public's trust and confidence in the internet at all times
- Follow the government web standards ([www.webstandards.govt.nz](http://www.webstandards.govt.nz))
- Consider using open source software
- Observe the government domain name moderation policy ([www.dns.govt.nz](http://www.dns.govt.nz))
- Follow the guidelines for preparing e-government business cases
- Follow the Trusted Computing and Digital Rights Management Standards and Guidelines ([www.archives.govt.nz](http://www.archives.govt.nz))

# End

Thank you for using this module.

Please use it as a starting point to learn about things that are unique or specific to government communications, rather than as an all-encompassing document or finite set of rules.

*We learn by example and by direct experience because there are real limits to the adequacy of verbal instruction.*

Malcolm Gladwell