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# The Four Tests of Public Service

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Keynote Address

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It is with great pleasure that I join you today in celebrating your achievement in graduating with a Certificate in Public Sector Management. Our public service is so important to the wellbeing of our society and those who work within it need the skills and capacities to make it work even better in an ever-changing world.

As individuals we have choices. Will we join the non-government, not-for-profit sector? Will we become part of the private sector? Might we become politicians? Interestingly working in the public service will bring you into contact with each of these sectors. That is one of the reasons why public sector work can be both challenging and rewarding. There are many stakeholders. It also means good public servants will be sought after by corporations, NGO's and often political parties because of the particular skills they have as experienced managers of policy implementation in different community settings.

Governments need to ensure that our public servants can see their career as rewarding and full of opportunities for personal achievement. Funding professional development is part of that obligation. Public servants too need to care about their profession and its future and that's why IPAA is so important.

What, then, does it mean to be a public servant? What is meant by public service? To answer this question, we need to ask -to whom are public servants accountable? I believe four lines of accountability can be drawn.

Firstly, there is accountability to the politicians. We live in a democracy and the elected government has the authority to set the direction for and organise the structure of the public sector. Public servants have an obligation to assist in this endeavour.

Secondly, they have a duty to act in the public interest. We expect high standards of efficiency, ethics and effectiveness and it is the role of our Corruption Commission, Auditors-General, Ombudsmen and other bodies such as a Public Sector Standards Commission to see to it that this is the case.

Thirdly, they have a responsibility to the agency they work for. Each agency of government has a different function -to ensure safety on the streets, to keep the air clean, to provide education and health care etc and we expect employees of each agency to do this job to the best of their ability. Talk of joined up government doesn't mean an abrogation of responsibility to their own agency and the principles that underpin its establishment and functioning.

Fourthly, to the general public and the various stakeholders for whom services are delivered and regulation undertaken.

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Just as the Rotary organisation has its four-way test so too should our public servants have their four-way test. It would go like this:

1. The personal test
2. The public interest test,
3. The management test
4. The political test

As public servants move up the system they get closer to the political arm of government. Some may become Directors General advising Ministers. Their relationship with a Minister will be governed by rules and protocols but in essence is a personal relationship. Not all Ministers are the same. Some Ministers will be eccentric. Some may lose their temper easily. Some may not know anything about their portfolio. Public servants have to manage this situation and given the authority that resides with the minister they have to learn to cope with all contingencies. This is what I would call the personal test.

When it comes to running an agency (or a part of an agency) efficiency and effectiveness are vital. So too is proper conduct and good process. Human relations have to be managed, ICT procured, and finances spent properly and to good effect. Results will be expected by the public and the politicians that represent them. Given that the public sector is complex with wider objectives than private profit this is never easy. It's what I would call the management test.

Public sector organisations will be judged. They will have reputations which are either good or bad. This reputation will not just be built on performance but also on consultation, the provision of information and engagement of the general public and stakeholders. Agencies that have a good reputation will be able to better withstand the inevitable crisis that come along. The trust they build up is like a buffer during times that are difficult, indeed challenging. Public sector agencies, then, need to be concerned about their image and reputation. This means some degree of marketing as well as good performance. This is what I would call the political test.

Finally, there is the public interest in respect of how they operate, that is free of conflicts of interest and with due process. There is also a public interest involved in what they do, that is in the interests of all rather than some at the expense of the many or at the expense of the environment which we have an obligation to protect for future generations. This is never easy but we need to be reminded that it is a legal obligation for a public official (elected or non-elected) to act in the public interest. This is what I would call the public interest test and is the basis upon which the accountability agencies of modern government judge the work of public servants.

There it is -a four-way test -that should always be at the forefront of a public servant's mind. The political test relates to reputation, the management test to agency performance, the personal test to relations with the Minister and the public interest test to the way things are done and what is produced.

It follows that to be a good public servant you need integrity, organising ability, political savvy and emotional intelligence. It's not easy but the rewards of success are many and will be shared by the wider society.

That's why we call it public service!