

Te Noho Taiapa | Political Neutrality

Political Neutrality Conversation Guide



Conversation Guide

Te kupu whakataki | Introduction

Often the best way to learn is through conversations with others, especially when it comes to finding out about your specific organisation. These guides are designed to build awareness about political neutrality and how to respond if you find yourself in an unfamiliar situation. The purpose of these guides is to enable you to lead your own discussions about political neutrality.

Ko tā tēnei puka | How this guide works

These guides can be used for one-on-one or group discussions. They can also be used to prompt a facilitated session. Prior knowledge about political neutrality is not necessary. There are links at the end of this document for additional reference.



Keep your politics out of your job and your job out of your politics.

Understanding Political Neutrality

Political neutrality is about serving Aotearoa New Zealand's democratically elected government to the best of our professional abilities, irrespective of our own personal political opinions. Political neutrality is a key principle outlined in the Public Service Act 2020.

Public servants have the same rights of political expression outside the workplace as other New Zealanders. It is important to maintain our integrity as public servants, but that doesn't mean we can't be politically engaged in our personal lives.

Discussion

- What do you know about political neutrality?
- Why do you think political neutrality is important in the Public Service?
 - *Serving the government of the day*
 - *Trust, and confidence of the public and Ministers*
 - *Preservation of capability and institutional knowledge*
- How do you think you would balance your role with your personal interests and activities in terms of political neutrality?
- What factors do you think you should consider when doing something of a political nature?

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Engaging in election activities

A volunteer for a political party comes to your door at home. It's a party that you are a member of, but you've never been actively involved. They are looking for volunteers. There are several options on how you can volunteer e.g. handing out flyers, attending a local rally, assisting with printing and mailing leaflets/letters.

Discussion

- Do you think volunteering for the political party is okay? Why/why not?
- Would the seniority of your role change your decision or the activities you might do?
- Could you print and mail leaflets from work?
- If you attended the rally, could you attend in work time or wear your lanyard?

Key principles

- For most of us our political neutrality responsibilities as public servants do not prevent us from being politically active in our private lives.
- Some caution is required and it's important to keep your work role separate by not using agency resources, using confidential government information or give the impression you are representing or speaking on behalf of your agency.
- Extra care is required if you are a senior public servant as you can be seen as representing your agency and are more likely to have direct contact with Ministers. These factors make it more difficult to separate personal interests with your public sector role.

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Commenting on government policies

You are out for dinner with a group of friends and family and they start asking questions about how your agency will implement the government's policies. They also ask which party you would prefer to work with.

Discussion

- How would you respond?
- Are there different issues for 'how your agency will implement the Government's policies' and 'what party you would prefer to work with'?
- Could you be seen to be speaking for your agency?
- What if the implementation of the policies has not yet been made public? Should you share this information?

Key principles

- You have rights of political expression and are able to discuss work and political matters with friends and family. However, there is potential in this situation for your views to be identified as the agency's views.
- You need to keep your work role separate by ensuring your opinions are not identified with your agency, give the impression you are speaking on behalf of your agency or use confidential government information for political purposes.
- More judgement and extra care is required if you are a senior public servant as you can be seen as representing your agency.

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Social Media engagement/interaction

Your friend posts a comment on a closed group social media page supporting a MP's viewpoint on a very topical issue within New Zealand. You'd like to 'like' the post and add your own comments to the chain supporting criticism of the Government's response to the issue.

Discussion

- Should you like and/or comment on the post?
- Does it make a difference if it is a closed or public social media group?
- What if you disclose where you work on the social media platform (i.e. LinkedIn)?
- What if you've provided advice on the issue to your Minister?
- Would the seniority of your role change your decision or what you might post?

Key principles

- You have rights of political expression and can engage with social media. However, you need to ensure you keep your job out of politics and consider the content of the post.
- Private comments can become public on social media, so it always pays to think before posting material online and to exercise good judgement when sending a post.
- Extra care is required if you are a senior public servant as you can be seen as representing your agency and are more likely to have direct contact with Ministers. These factors make it more difficult to separate personal interests with your public sector role.

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Engaging in Political Debate

You're on the bus following a live stream of a political debate and government policy your agency is involved with comes up. You provide advice on this issue and some of the information being debated is not accurate.

Discussion

- Will you join in the live stream to correct the information? Why/why not?
- Could you get drawn into political debate here rather than just correcting misinformation?
- Who else could correct the misinformation, e.g. Ministers, agency senior management, others?
- Could you be seen to be speaking for your agency?

Key principles

- Careful consideration is required. You may get drawn into political debate and breach political neutrality principles.
- Ministers determine and promote government policy and the public sector implements government policy. Given the political nature of the debate any correction to information or response may be better coming from the Minister.
- Given you provide advice on the issue, you may have privileged information that is not shared publicly. You must not use confidential government information for political purposes.

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Additional references and information

Reflection: After you have been through the scenarios above, has anything changed in what you would consider?

For more information, refer to [He Aratohu | A guide on integrity and conduct](#) from Te Kawa Mataaho Public Service Commission.

If you are ever in doubt, reach out to your manager in the first instance, or to the integrity and ethics champion at your agency.



If you have any feedback about this learning, please complete this [evaluation form](#). Your feedback helps us continuously evolve and improve our content to suit the needs of learners. This form will take only take about 5 minutes to complete.

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