



MODERNISERINGSDEPARTEMENTET

# Ethical Guidelines for the Public Service

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## Foreword

High ethical standards for the provision of services and the exercise of authority are a prerequisite if the citizenry is to trust the public service. The goal of these general ethical guidelines is to ensure that all State employees are aware of this. The ethical guidelines are to be of a general nature, rather than providing detailed rules. They are intended to be general guidelines that call for reflection on the part of the individual employee. The provisions enshrined in them are not always exact, but rather specify legal standards.

The guidelines have evolved from ethical values and norms of universal validity such as justice, loyalty, honesty, reliability, truthfulness and that one treats others as one would like to be treated.

Norway has many rules of law (statutory and non-statutory) that impact values and ethics in the public service. The ethical standards that apply at any given time have an impact on the framing of legislation and other regulations. From this perspective, the guidelines complement the existing rules of law. Some current rules of law are discussed in more detail under the section "Relationship to legislation and regulations".

### **The guidelines' status, and local responsibility**

The guidelines shall generally apply to the entire public service, implying that all State government bodies are subject to them. State-owned enterprises and other state enterprises and institutions must consider the need for introducing their own ethical guidelines.

The Ministry of Modernisation requires that each individual organisation apply the guidelines to further develop and improve ethical awareness among its employees, thus establishing a firm foundation for managers and employees to engage in ethical reflection.

Each individual organisation must review whether it needs to supplement the guidelines, based on the individual organisation's requirements.

Consideration for the employees and the protection of a good working environment are discussed under several sections of the guidelines. It is important that employees have professional and personal development opportunities and that consideration be taken for the needs of individuals when work is organised. Consideration for employees will be embodied in an organisation's personnel policy, but the individual organisation must also be prepared to supplement the general ethical guidelines in this area.

Behaviour or actions at variance with the general ethical guidelines do not carry special sanctions, but breaches of the provisions that apply to conflicts of interest, for example, could result in a decision being declared invalid. An act or failure to act in the service could be considered dereliction of duty, and could lead to service sanctions. An act or failure to act in the service can also be so gross that it could lead to prosecution and punitive reactions. Clear breaches of statutory provisions will ordinarily also be breaches of ethical and administrative guidelines of universal validity.

Even if a service-capacity act or failure to act does not entail a direct breach of laws or formal rules, they can be brought to bear in a personnel case if they entail a breach of ethical guidelines. Given that the ethical guidelines have been made known throughout an

organisation, not least to individuals, breaches of the guidelines will be a factor that can be emphasised, for example, in an overall assessment of the relevant public official's suitability or, in connection with an internal application for a new position, where it is fair to require compliance with the organisation's ethical guidelines.

### **Employers, managers and employees**

The State, as an employer represented by the Ministry of Modernisation, bears the ultimate responsibility for providing ethical guidelines and ensuring compliance with them. Top management in ministries and subordinate organisations bear a special responsibility for follow up. This is mainly because managers, through their words, actions and management style, exert a strong influence on the culture and standards of conduct that apply in an organisation. Secondly, it is because top managers can also be put in situations where choices and decisions call for ethical reflection and wisdom. Thirdly, it is because top management bears responsibility for ensuring that the entire organisation is aware of the ethical standards that apply, and for ensuring that the organisation addresses any breaches of laws or regulations immediately in order to avoid the development of unfortunate customs or culture.

The individual employee is required to familiarise him- or herself with the provisions and instructions that apply to his or her job at any given time, and is personally responsible for the best possible compliance with the guidelines.

### **The structure of the document**

The guidelines *per se* have been put in grey boxes in this document, while the remainder of the text comprises the Ministry of Modernisation's comments to the individual provisions. The introduction to each main section includes comments on the key points.

The guidelines generally use the concept 'citizenry', also where it might be natural to use concepts such as citizen, audience, customer or user.

# Ethical Guidelines for the Public Service

## 1. General provisions

Public officials shall be guided by ethical and administrative values and norms of universal validity. Each employee bears independent responsibility for contributing to his or her organisation's confidence and prestige. State employees shall not let their own self-interests affect the way in which they deal with cases or other work, nor let consideration for their own or their organisation's convenience or prestige affect their actions or decisions.

### 1.1 Concern for the citizenry

Both as the exerciser of authority, provider of services and steward of significant social resources, the central government administration and thus the individual employee

- is obligated to take account of the public interest, to strive to achieve equal treatment and to treat individuals with respect.

#### Comments:

*Upon performing the duties of office, especially in exercising administrative authority, a balance will often have to be struck between general social considerations, protecting the principles of government for the citizenry (e.g. legal safeguards) and the individual citizen's special interests. First and foremost, we must bear in mind that the Public Service exists to serve the citizenry.*

*In both the exercise of authority and the provision of services, each and every public official shall be considerate, friendly, polite, correct and accommodating to the public in written as well as verbal communication. This applies even when the other party does not maintain the same decorum.*

*All communication must be worded so that the recipients easily understand it.*

*All legislation and regulation provisions about confidentiality and the protection of privacy shall be observed. An individual public official shall always respect an individual citizen's personal integrity.*

*It is important to be aware of the needs, values, norms and expectations of members of ethnic minorities, both in communication and in the wording of administrative decisions and the delivery of services.*