

The Special Nature of Public Service

Those who work for public agencies must keep in mind the important ways that public service differs from working in the private sector.



Why It's Different?

Public agencies were created by the public to accomplish things that could not be done by individuals acting alone or with a profit motive. People who work in public agencies are entrusted with resources, power and authority. But the nature of that trust is that these resources, power and authority can be used only to benefit the public — not those in public service. This makes public service different from working in the private sector.

Public sector employees work for the public. As a public employee, you may have a supervisor. That supervisor may be accountable to others in the organization. Ultimately, however, the agency is accountable to members of the public, who elects the agency's governing body and also can decide how much revenue the agency will have to do its work. Through the ballot measure process, the public can even take decision-making authority away from elected officials and enact its own policies.

What This Means for You as a Public Employee

People who work for public agencies must hold themselves to the same high standards that the public has for those who are elected or appointed to public service. The exact combination of standards depends on a particular individual's job within the organization. However, three cross-cutting principles apply to all public servants:

- Public employees are stewards of scarce public resources;
- Public agencies must treat everyone fairly, irrespective of who they know or are related to; and
- Public service means one's actions are subject to public scrutiny.

For more, see www.ca-ilg.org/trust or ca-ilg.org/promoting-personal-organizational-ethics

The following chart provides some detail on the principles and duties important to public service as well as examples and missteps to avoid. Note that many of these principles are tied to laws that impose severe penalties — both fines and even jail time — for missteps.

DUTY	PRINCIPLE	EXAMPLES AND MISSTEPS TO AVOID
Trustee of Public Resource	<p>1. Use of Agency Equipment, Supplies, Facilities and Technology. As public agency employee, you will be entrusted with access to equipment, facilities, technology, supplies and other materials that are paid for with taxpayer dollars and therefore belong to the public. These may be used only to serve the public and not for your own or others' individual benefit.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using an agency truck or tools on a weekend for a personal construction project • Using an agency copying machine or postage meter to copy or send personal documents • Taking office supplies home for personal use • Playing golf on the agency course without paying the greens fee • Using an agency vehicle for personal errands
	<p>2. Time is Money. An employee's time on the job is also a public resource. The expectation is that public employees will put in a full day's work for a full day's pay. Public employees may not use public agency time for personal tasks and pursuits.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asking your co-worker to repair or work on your car in the agency's public works yard • Having conversations (in person, on the telephone, via social media or email) not related to agency business that go beyond ordinary pleasantries while "on the clock" • Accessing the Internet for personal use outside of scheduled break time (note: in some agencies, any personal use of computer equipment is not allowed) • Running personal errands during work time • Performing charitable activities on agency time
	<p>3. Money is Money. Limited taxpayer dollars must be stretched as far as possible in service to the public. This puts a premium on making wise purchases with agency money and using agency money only for public purposes.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using agency credit cards or their equivalent for personal purchases • When traveling, staying at luxury facilities, not taking advantage of conference rates or generally spending more than necessary to accomplish the public's business • Enhancing and/or increasing your own compensation without going through an open and transparent process
	<p>4. Disposal of Outmoded or Surplus Property. The agency has processes for disposing of surplus or outmoded property. Under no circumstances may public agency employees sell agency materials and keep the proceeds themselves or give agency materials to others.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Selling surplus construction material to a scrap dealer or through online services such as craigslist • Sharing agency office supplies with a local religious organization or charity

DUTY	PRINCIPLE	EXAMPLES AND MISSTEPS TO AVOID
Fair Treatment of All	<p>5. Fair Treatment. A key element of democracy is that public agencies treat everyone the same. For public employees, this means applying agency rules and standards to everyone in the same manner. Conversely, giving preferences to friends, family or those who either have or may be in a position to help you is inconsistent with the value of fairness.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Waiving agency rules, standards and procedures — that everyone else must adhere to — for yourself, friends and family • Processing your own, friends and relatives' applications faster than others • Giving hiring preference to family and friends
	<p>6. Gifts or Special Gestures. People may offer to buy meals and beverages for you, give you tickets to sporting or other entertainment events or even provide a thank-you gift for help you provide as part of doing your job. Usually these gestures should be declined with "thanks, but no thanks." Under no circumstances should employees do anything that would cause someone to believe that such special gestures will secure them preferential treatment.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accepting tickets to an entertainment venue from those who need a permit, license or franchise from the agency • Going out to dinner with those who hope to be awarded an agency contract • Accepting a six-pack of beer from a grateful property owner after repairing a broken water main in front of the property • Accepting a gift basket from an agency vendor during the holidays • Taking money in return for any action you take in your capacity as a public employee
Public Perception Scrutiny and Accountability	<p>7. The Public's Right to Know. Your emails and other communications, requests for expense reimbursement and virtually all documents relating to agency operations may be reviewed by the media and public; so may your salary, which can be reported as both salary and benefits.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An email intended for internal use gets forwarded to the media or released as part of a request for public records • Employees' salaries (typically including taxes and benefits to make the salaries appear much higher than what employees consider to be their "take home" pay) are reported in the media • Reimbursement requests for steak dinners, travel by taxi, alcohol or greens fees get publicized in the media as examples of employees wasting taxpayer money on luxurious expenses
	<p>8. Public Scrutiny. As a public employee, you work for the public. As such, your behavior on the job (and sometimes even off duty) is subject to public scrutiny and judgment. Behave accordingly.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Smartphone videos of difficult interactions with the public have been posted on YouTube • Less than courteous phone messages by public employees have been released to the media as examples of unprofessional, threatening or abusive behavior • Ill-considered social media posts on personal accounts have been distributed beyond personal acquaintances and caused embarrassment or worse • Behavior under the influence of alcohol or other substances has raised questions regarding judgment and/or fitness for public service • Guilt by association: Employees' relationships with those who have had legal troubles have also been the subject of public discussion • Marital infidelity or other relationship issues can be more public for public employees

Public service is based on trust. It takes people committed to adhering to the legal duties and the principles of public service to earn the public's trust and respect.

- In your public service, there will undoubtedly be times when you are tempted to put your own interests ahead of the larger organizational or public interest that you serve. Resist that temptation.
- As a public servant, there will be things that you might be able to do if you worked in the private sector that you can't do because you are a public employee. This is why public service isn't for everyone.

Do you have concerns? If at any time in your public service, issues arise that are similar to the examples given here, please bring them to the attention of your supervisor or another trusted individual at the management level (for example, in the Human Resources Department).



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- Local Government Basics
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Additional Information

The Institute also offers materials to help local agencies get newly appointed officials as well as newly elected officials get off to a strong start. These include materials about public service ethics, but also more general issues.

On public service ethics, the Institute offers the following resources:

- *Understanding the Basics of Public Service Ethics* available at www.ca-ilg.org/EthicsLaws
- "The 'Front Page' Test: An Easy Ethics Standard" available at www.ca-ilg.org/FrontPageTest
- For more General Orientation Materials available at www.ca-ilg.org/local-government-basics-those-new-public-service