



REFERENCE

Conduct and communication in a plant-export environment

Purpose of this document

This document is a reference guide for authorised officers (AOs) for conduct and communicating effectively in a plant-export environment.

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Introduction

Conduct and communication are a vital part of the work of an authorised officer (AO). By the end of this reference you should:

- understand the legislation, policies and guidelines required of an AO
- understand the communication reporting lines
- be aware of some effective communication techniques
- be aware of effective conflict management techniques
- have an increased awareness on how to be respectful and understanding of cultural and linguistic diversity.

Relevant legislation, policies and values

There are a number of policies that govern how AOs interact with internal and external clients. Some relevant legislation, policy and guidelines include:

- *Public Service Act 1999* and subordinate legislation
- Australian Public Service (APS) Values and Code of Conduct
- *Privacy Act 1988*
- Department of Agriculture and Water Resources Governance Framework.

Public Service Act 1999

The [Public Service Act 1999](#) and subordinate legislation governs the operation of the APS and establishes the rights and obligations of APS employees.

APS Values and Code of Conduct

The APS Values and Code of Conduct are set out in the [Public Service Act 1999](#). The Values and Code of Conduct set the standard of behaviour expected of all commonwealth employees, including AOs performing services on behalf of the government.

Privacy Act 1988

The [Privacy Act 1988](#) governs the handling of personal information about individuals.

Governance Framework

The department's [corporate governance framework](#) provides the mechanisms to ensure we set and pursue our objectives efficiently, effectively and ethically.

Communication reporting lines

It is important that AOs be aware of the appropriate reporting lines for plant export inspection, documentation and incident reporting.

- For departmental AOs, an Inspection Services Group supervisor or manager is contacted.
- For external AOs, the Plant Export Authorised Officer Hotline is contacted:

1800 851 305

Incident reporting

Examples of reportable incidents include issues concerning:

- consignments for export, inspection and/or documentation
- instructional material
- work health and safety
- export regulations and legislation
- APS Values and Code of Conduct
- any incident likely to attract the interest of the media.

Note taking when an incident occurs

Immediately following any incident it is best practice and a safeguard to make notes of the circumstances and the conversation details. A person could make a complaint to the Minister, the newspaper, the Executive Director or to any number of people.

If the complaint is made months after the event, notes ensure that evidence of the occurrence is documented. Notes are made immediately after the event when the details of the incident are still fresh.

Effective communication skills

It is important for an AO to communicate effectively with clients and to be as clear as possible in all communications.

Communication involving either verbal or non-verbal elements (or a combination of both) requires interpretation. This process is dependent on the receiver giving consideration to understanding the words, motives, feelings and needs of the sender.

Communication occurs in many forms, including:

- verbal
- written
- listening
- body language.

Communicating with people from other cultures

When communicating with people from other cultures it is important to consider how your messages may be interpreted by the receivers, and how their cultural differences may influence their interpretation. The receiver may interpret the message quite differently to your intention and this could lead to misunderstanding or conflict.

Barriers may stop the message being conveyed or received as intended. Understanding the possible barriers is one of the first steps to effective communication.

Active listening

Effective communication requires both parties to listen to the communicated messages. Active listening enables the other person to observe that their message has been received.

Active listening involves:

- being attentive and maintaining eye contact with the other person
- nodding your head to show understanding and agreement
- clarifying communication by asking questions and/or reiterating the message.

Importance of non-verbal communication

We are greatly influenced by the non-verbal communication of others. It is estimated that people remember approximately 55 per cent of the non-verbal communication in the exchange.

Non-verbal communication is an essential part of all person-to-person situations in all cultures. The meanings attributed to non-verbal communications may change from culture to culture, and vary within cultures.

This sometimes makes communication confusing and difficult, since you are just as likely to have your messages misinterpreted as you might misinterpret someone else's message.

Adjusting your non-verbal communication style according to the situation and audience can have a positive impact on interactions.

Delivering the message clearly

The way in which a message is delivered can have a significant impact on how the message is received. It is important to be clear, concise and direct, and concentrate on facts rather than emotions.

Also consider the most effective communication medium that is most accessible to your audience or stakeholders and be prepared to be flexible, if you can, to meet their communication needs.

For example, if the client does not have web access, then posting documents on the website is not going to be an effective way of communicating with them without alternate means of providing the information.

Quality assurance is also a part of effective communication - spell checking, syntax and complexity of the language used can also hinder good communication.

Ensuring the message has been received

Communication is only considered to have been effective if the correct message has been received.

Techniques for ensuring the message has been received correctly include:

- asking open questions (who? what? where? when? why?)
- seeking input and/or feedback
- asking the recipient to repeat your message.

Having better phone conversations

The role of an AO requires regular communication with clients via telephone. Professional telephone etiquette involves answering calls promptly and greeting the client using a polite, friendly tone of voice and speaking clearly.

The following are some tips for having better phone conversations:

- answer the telephone promptly and identify yourself and workplace
- be ready to talk and ensure you can hear and be heard clearly (especially on mobile phones)
- determine the context of the call and if you are unable to assist, refer the caller to someone who can, or take a message and act upon it within a specified timeframe
- speak at a comfortable rate and friendly tone
- be courteous, helpful and responsive
- answer questions directly and avoid jargon or colloquialisms
- listen sympathetically to a caller's complaints
- apologise for any errors and delays and don't argue with a caller
- make a real effort to speak clearly and listen carefully.

Note: for a file note, ensure the following are recorded: date and time of the message, the caller's details, the essence of the conversation and any actions arising, contact telephone number.

Writing better emails

AOs communicate regularly with clients via email. The following are some tips for writing better emails:

- determine if email is the best method of contact
- use friendly and polite language
- only use *Reply All* when your response is to be directed to all recipients
- when forwarding an email, delete unnecessary information
- use a clear, concise, structured approach
- use spell check
- double check the message prior to sending.

Note: email is considered an official correspondence of the department.

Conflict management

Conflict management is an essential skill to assist in diffusing difficult situations. As the department is a regulatory body, it is not uncommon to come across aggressive, persuasive and irate clients. Conflict may also occur in the workplace with colleagues.

Reasons for conflict

There are numerous reasons why certain people become angry or aggressive. Reasons for unpleasant behaviour may include:

- the department fulfilling their regulatory role and seen as a barrier
- fees and payments required for services provided
- fatigue due to long working hours and fast-paced environments
- bad experiences with an APS agency in the past
- embarrassing situations
- frustration due to language and/or cultural differences
- lack of verbal skills to communicate in a non-aggressive fashion
- naturally aggressive personality
- lack of control over a situation is seen as threatening.

Managing conflict situations

In a conflict situation it is important to stay calm and remain professional. The following are some tips for managing a conflict situation:

- speak slowly and clearly, and do not raise your voice
- maintain eye contact
- apply reflective listening skills
- identify the person's needs
- separate the people from the problem
- provide options
- state the facts
- explain the reasons
- persevere.

Note: if the situation becomes dangerous and is a threat to your personal safety, leave the area immediately and contact the department.

Physical aggression

Physical aggression is in a totally different category and is generally a matter for the police. If there is any actual physical aggression, or the real threat of physical aggression, you should firstly protect yourself.

Seek urgent assistance. If this is not possible leave the area as quickly as possible, contact the police and advise the department as soon as practical.

Working with cultural diversity

Australia is a culturally diverse society. According to the 2016 Australian Census:

- 2.8 per cent of the Australian population identifies as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples
- almost half of the Australia population was born overseas or have at least one parent who was born overseas
- over 300 cultural groups exist in Australia
- over 100 religions are followed in Australia.

Cultural competency

AOs communicate with a diverse range of clients and will occasionally liaise with international visitors, such as government inspectors and company representatives. It is therefore important to have cultural competence. Cultural competence can be defined as having attained the following:

- awareness of one's own culture, values and biases
- ability to control own biases
- culture-specific knowledge
- knowledge of institutional barriers that prevent some populations from accessing resources
- ability to build strong cross-cultural relationships and to be at ease with difference
- flexibility and ability to adapt to diverse environments
- ability and willingness to assist individuals who are different from oneself
- effective communication skills across cultures
- ability to mediate cross-cultural conflicts.

Cultural awareness

Cultural awareness is an essential component of effective communication and it involves the ability to stand back from oneself and become aware of our cultural values, beliefs and perceptions.

Cultural awareness becomes central when we interact with people from other cultures. People see, interpret and evaluate things in different ways.

Knowing more about another's culture can be a positive way of establishing a bond with fellow workers and clients. What is considered an appropriate behaviour in one culture is frequently inappropriate in another.

For example:

- Conversational style—Some people seem to be abrupt, almost rude in their conversational style. Often nothing negative is intended; it is just their style of communication. Some cultures use loud voices for emphasis while others only raise their voice in anger.

- Pausing in speech—In certain cultures silence may indicate respect, while in others it may mean ‘no’ and in another culture it may be perceived as giving ‘the silent treatment’. Silence is perceived as comfortable in Japan, while in India, Europe and North America it may cause embarrassment.
- Handshake—Although a polite handshake is accepted in most cultures, there are exceptions where men do not shake hands with women.
- Thumbs up hand signal—Showing the thumb held upwards in Brazil and some western European cultures, means ‘everything's ok’, while it is understood in some Islamic cultures as a rude sexual sign.
- OK hand signal—‘Everything ok’ is shown in western European countries with the sign of the thumb and forefinger forming an ‘O’. In Japan, this sign means ‘now we may talk about money’, in southern France ‘nothing, or without any value’, in some Latin American countries, Eastern Europe and Russia it is an indecent sexual sign.
- Laughing—Laughing is connoted in most countries with happiness. In Japan laughing is often a sign of confusion and embarrassment.
- Eye contact—In Africa, avoiding eye contact or looking at the ground when talking to one's parents, an elder, or someone of higher social status is a sign of respect. In contrast, these actions are signals of deception or shame in North America and most of Europe. In some cultures it is inappropriate for females to make eye contact with males.

Related material

- Australian Public Service (APS) Values and Code of Conduct
- Department of Agriculture and Water Resources [corporate governance framework](#)
- [Privacy Act 1988](#)
- [Public Service Act 1999](#)
- [Plant exports operations manual \(PEOM\)](#)
 - Guidelines
 - Work instructions
 - References.

Contact

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Document information

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