

CIVIL SERVICE ETHICS

This is a beautiful summary of the ethics of the UK civil service, taken from a 1949 [Handbook for the New Civil Servant](#).

The first thing that strikes many people, when they come into a Government office for the first time, is the importance that the Civil Service attaches to papers - files, memoranda, written records of all kinds. A good deal of the work of the Civil Service, of course, is done by telephone or by personal conversation, but you will find that anything important or new has to be recorded on paper somewhere, sooner or later; and in all probability a large part of your work will consist of dealing with papers – reading them and writing them.

You may think this is a slow and cumbrous way of doing things; but there are two reasons for it. The first is the Parliamentary system of government. Parliament has the right to inquire into any action taken by a Government Department, and a Parliamentary Question may be asked at short notice, perhaps a long time after the event, perhaps in absence of the civil servant who actually took that particular action. So that Parliament may get the information, it is essential that there should be a written record of the action and, as far as possible, of the reasons for it. Secondly, the written record is necessary to preserve the impartiality of the Civil Service to the public. The Civil Service cannot, as a private business sometimes may, give one customer a bargain and make up for it by charging another customer extra; it has to deal with all on the same terms. Therefore, there must be a written record of what has been done in the past, so that it may be done again in the future when the same problem arises. That does not mean that the Civil Service is bound by precedent. Very often there will be no precedent, in other cases it is clearly right to modify earlier policy. But this should be done not by intuition but deliberately after considering what previous practice has been.

Another thing that may strike you is that very few problems seem to be settled by one person alone: the papers may sometimes pass through several hands before a letter is answered or a decision given. This is partly due to the need for looking at the records – a job which is done by the juniors – partly because very often a subject will concern more than one branch of a Department. The process need not cause delay and is essential if there is to be a consistent policy.

From the very first you must learn to be precise and honest in your work. You must fully appreciate the problem to be solved; you must then collect and check all the relevant facts, and set them out clearly and fairly. Don't take anything for granted: there is always more than one point of view, and it may be dangerous to accept somebody else's statement without verifying it for yourself. Don't be lazy and try to pass off a guess as an accurate figure or statement; it may not be questioned, but if it is you must be prepared to justify it. If you see a snag, or a difficulty, or a point which you don't understand, don't ignore it in the hope that nobody else will spot it; it is your job to straighten it out, or if you can't, at least to

point it out to your chief and let him deal with it. Whatever shortcomings civil servants may have, they must never be found wanting in his kind of honesty.

Moreover, you must be accurate. You must learn the importance of using words in their exact meanings, so that they convey, to somebody you have never seen, exactly what you intend to convey, and not just something roughly approximating to it. If there is any ambiguity in your phrasing somebody is sure to misunderstand; so say what you mean, simply and clearly. Keep your sentences short and avoid officialese. Read "Plain Words," the book by Sir Ernest Gowers, published by the Stationery Office at 2s.

[Rebecca Gowers, Sir Ernest's great-granddaughter, has created a new edition of 'Plain Words', updating it to reflect modern English usage.]