

Law enforcement and public sector agencies may be vulnerable to corruption in circumstances where frontline managers who have limited management expertise have delegated decision-making responsibilities.

ACLEI investigations have observed that devolving decision-making authority to frontline managers, without appropriate support mechanisms to empower effective performance, may leave agencies and their staff susceptible to corrupt compromise.

Frontline management capability

The delegation of decision-making responsibilities to the front line is a reality of Australian public sector employment¹.

Delegation may increase organisational efficiency and effectiveness by reducing decision-making pressure on senior managers and allow simpler, lower-risk decisions to be made by frontline managers.

This may include, for example, authorising frontline managers to decide on applications for access to standard conditions of employment such as personal or annual leave².

While delegation is important and necessary, it is not without its risks. Agencies which have devolved decision-making responsibility, without appropriate governance arrangements, may encounter problems maintaining workplace integrity and cohesiveness³. Risk may also be heightened in situations where frontline managers have limited expertise and agency expectations are not communicated clearly and consistently – potentially leading to unintended or perverse outcomes.



What you need to know:

High risk area — limited management expertise

Officers will invariably bring a range of experiences to their frontline management roles, with some having more extensive management capability than others. Ensuring frontline managers have the requisite skills, knowledge and experience to effectively perform their management responsibilities is an important consideration for agencies operating in an environment with devolved decision-making⁴.

Selection practices for frontline management positions should include explicit emphasis on candidates being able to demonstrate the requisite management capabilities required for the position⁵. Agencies should also ensure frontline managers have access to adequate training and support to exercise their delegated responsibilities⁶. Agency policies, and directions from senior managers, should provide frontline managers with the confidence and authority required to successfully and consistently perform their management responsibilities.

¹ Easton 2015 *Secretaries approve APS manifesto for management revolution*. The Mandarin: [link here](#)

² Perry & Kulik 2008 *The devolution of HR to the line: Implications for perceptions of people management effectiveness*. International Journal of Human Resource Management: [link here](#)

³ Kane-Urrabazo 2006 *Management's role in shaping organisational culture*. Journal of Nursing Management: [link here](#)

⁴ Perry & Kulik 2008 *The devolution of HR to the line: Implications for perceptions of people management effectiveness*. International Journal of Human Resource Management: [link here](#)

⁵ Pearson-Goff & Herrington 2014 *Police leadership: A systematic review of the literature*. Policing, AIPM: [link here](#)

⁶ Whittaker & Marchington 2003 *Devolving HR responsibility to the line: Threat, opportunity or partnership?* Employee Relations: [link here](#)

Agencies which assume frontline managers possess the requisite level of management capability – rather than taking proactive steps to ensure capability exists – may be exposed to unnecessary risk⁷.

At best, officers with limited management expertise may defer decisions to more senior staff, negating the efficiency benefits gained from devolved management authority. At worst, frontline managers may be taken advantage of by subordinate employees and/or inadvertently contribute to the establishment of a workplace culture that is inconsistent with their agency's integrity expectations⁸.

High risk area — conflicting or unclear expectations

Frontline managers who receive clear and consistent guidance and direction regarding integrity expectations and values are better placed to visibly demonstrate these expectations to their staff and are empowered to act to address inconsistencies⁹.

However, the absence of clear and consistent messaging from an agency's centre may lead to unintended outcomes, including the establishment of sub-cultures, structures, policies and procedures that maintain little identification with the agency's expectations or values¹⁰.

Employees may develop misplaced loyalty if local practices are perceived to be more beneficial than agency expectations allow – loyalty will be to themselves and the people in their team instead of to the agency. This could allow undesired behaviours and possible corruption to fester and go unreported.

High risk area — toxic workplace subcultures

An ACLEI investigation concluded that some frontline managers may be uncomfortable challenging the validity of evidence provided to support an absence from work, such as an apparently-genuine medical certificate or statutory declaration, even where they have reasonable cause for concern.

A lack of relevant management experience was identified as a potential contributing factor in this and other similar cases.

Workplace culture has a considerable impact on employee decision making and behaviour. Often described as 'how things are done around here'¹¹, workplace culture is multi-dimensional. Workplace culture is also dynamic and changes constantly¹².

Large agencies will invariably consist of multiple sub-cultures which develop and evolve over time and place¹³. Positive workplace cultures may provide employees with a point of reference to inform decision making, articulate acceptable behaviours, and act as a system of control supporting the prevention and/or identification of undesired or unacceptable actions.

Workplace culture can act as a strong deterrent against corruption when it complements other mechanisms in an agency's corruption prevention system. In its report on corruption and opportunities for women in law enforcement, ACLEI notes that subversive sub-cultures are unlikely to thrive in environments where employees feel valued by their organisation¹⁴.

However, agencies with weak or conflicting cultures and subcultures may be more susceptible to corruption, particularly when employees do not maintain a clear understanding of – or resonance with – the agency's core values and expected behaviours¹⁵.

In a worst case scenario, frontline managers with limited capability, operating in a potentially subversive or toxic subculture, may be exploited by employees seeking access to benefits to which they are not entitled. In an environment where this behaviour is left unchecked, problems may become systemic and produce an unethical climate where the behaviour becomes accepted as the norm.

⁷ Brown, Hirsh & Reilly 2019 *Strategic HRM in Practice: Case Studies and Conclusions – from HRM Strategy to Strategic People Management*. Institute for Employment Studies UK: [link here](#)

⁸ APSC 2003 *Building Capability: A framework for managing learning and development in the APS*. APSC: [link here](#)

⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ Watkins 2013 *What is Organisational Culture? And Why Should We Care?* Harvard Business Review: [link here](#)

¹² *ibid*

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ ACLEI 2017 *Corruption and the changing opportunities for women in law enforcement*. ACLEI: [link here](#)

¹⁵ Lewis 2019 *Why Malcolm Gladwell's 'Broken Windows' Theory Is Key For Building A Better Business*. Forbes: [link here](#)

What should you do?

For agencies:

- Consider whether frontline managers are aware of, and have the capacity and capability to perform, the duties the agency expects of them.
- Ensure frontline managers are adequately supported to deal with challenging situations such as counselling subordinates and peers who are behaving contrary to agency expectations.
- Make sure frontline managers have a clear understanding of their decision-making responsibilities and exercise their authority in a manner consistent with the agency's expectations – include management responsibilities in performance agreements and consider the provision of specific training to build requisite management skills.
- Don't assume that all officers in frontline management positions have the same breadth and depth of experience – when recruiting, ensure position descriptions clearly articulate the management responsibilities of the role and assess applicants to ensure they possess the required skills, knowledge and experience.

For managers:

- Cultivate a work environment where professional standards are valued and model preferred behaviour.
- Act against undesired behaviours and reinforce the integrity values of the agency – the standard you walk past is the standard you accept.
- Foster an environment where your team are empowered to ask questions, seek advice and raise concerns – they are best placed to know if something is going on in the work area.
- Be alert to the formation of internal networks or subcultures within your work area.

For employees:

- Contribute to a positive workplace integrity culture by knowing and modelling preferred workplace behaviour.
- Consider where your loyalties lie - know what you would do in a situation where you observe a colleague behaving in a manner that is inconsistent with the agency's integrity expectations.
- Don't self-manage risk – act early and report it to your agency.

Further information

- ACLEI has developed a series of corruption prevention posters for the use of public and private sector agencies to promote and enhance integrity awareness. The posters use behavioural insight tools to communicate integrity expectations, encourage reporting, and reinforce the positive role that all employees play in maintaining a high integrity workplace. ACLEI's Corruption Prevention Posters can be accessed via the ACLEI website: [here](#)
- ACLEI Corruption Prevention Concepts Factsheet: [Workplace Culture](#)



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