



# Political influence in public sector recruitment

## Guidance material – integrity scenario

This guidance material presents an ‘integrity scenario’ which is intended to assist in public sector training regarding integrity risks, highlighting the risk of politicisation – where public sector work can be influenced by the political beliefs or strategies of a specific party or interest group. This influence can affect public service delivery and recruitment practices driven by political motivations.

It demonstrates how pressure to appoint politically aligned candidates can compromise the integrity and effectiveness of the public service. The scenario shows the importance of recruitment being merit-based and the need for robust processes to maintain the independence of the public sector.

### The situation

An executive director position became vacant in a Victorian Government agency responsible for overseeing major public health programs. The role of the executive director was crucial, requiring a mix of technical proficiency, leadership skills and stakeholder management expertise.

The agency’s CEO, who had been in the role for just over a year, was responsible for overseeing the recruitment process. The CEO had a background in both the public and private sectors and was known for their ‘results-oriented’ approach.

## How did the misconduct start?

As the recruitment process began, the CEO received a call from a senior adviser in the minister's office. The adviser casually mentioned that several strong candidates might apply, including a former ministerial staffer who was searching for a senior public service role. The adviser emphasised this person's understanding of government priorities but did not explicitly push for their appointment.

The CEO, while committed to a fair process, took note of this information. They reasoned that considering candidates with political experience alongside those with technical expertise and leadership experience could bring a useful perspective to the role.

## How did it escalate?

During the initial screening of applications, the CEO reviewed the shortlist prepared by the recruitment team. Noticing that the former ministerial staffer had not made the cut, the CEO asked for a review of their application. Concerned about maintaining a positive relationship with the minister, the CEO felt pressure to consider the advisor's suggestion that this person was a 'strong candidate.' After some discussion, the recruitment team agreed to include this candidate, acknowledging their political experience as potentially valuable.

As the recruitment process progressed, the CEO found themselves increasingly drawn to having someone with political expertise in the role. They began to see government experience as a significant asset, overlooking minor gaps in technical qualifications and leadership skills.

In selection panel discussions, the CEO's focus on 'stakeholder management' and 'policy alignment' over technical and leadership skills reflected political bias in the recruitment process. When other panel members raised concerns about a candidate's limited health industry experience, the CEO would counter with arguments about the value of diverse perspectives. The panel, which included the CEO and two other senior executives, was divided. One panel member consistently advocated for candidates with strong technical backgrounds and leadership experience, while the CEO increasingly favoured those with political experience.

Ultimately, after much debate, the panel chose the candidate with a mix of political and sector experience, though their technical qualifications and leadership experience were not as strong as some other applicants. The CEO had not directly overridden the panel but had significantly influenced the decision through persistent advocacy.

An unsuccessful candidate sought a merits review, which concluded that, while the process was not corrupt, it demonstrated bias in the recruitment processes. This bias created difficulties for the selected candidate in gaining credibility in their role, as they faced scrutiny and scepticism from stakeholders due to the perceived influence of political considerations.





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## Lessons learned

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- Reinforce the importance of merit-based recruitment at all levels of the public service.
- Implement robust processes for senior appointments, including independent selection panels and transparent decision-making criteria.
- Provide training for senior leaders on managing political pressures and maintaining public service independence.
- Establish clear protocols for communication between ministerial offices and the public service regarding recruitment matters.
- Strengthen whistleblower protections to encourage reporting of improper recruitment practices.
- Regularly audit recruitment processes, especially for senior roles, to ensure compliance with public sector principles.

This product was prepared based on findings from research and stakeholder consultations from IBAC's 2024 Public Sector Strategic Assessment. It is representative and created for educational purposes only. Any similarities to real persons, organisations, or incidents is purely coincidental.

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