

Ethical growth requires self-awareness. Does the public service know itself?

Matt Beard

In a well-known commencement speech, given at Kenyon College in 2005, the author David Foster Wallace shared a “short parable-ish story” grounded in the deep and abiding wisdom of goldfish.

“There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says “Morning, boys. How’s the water?” And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes “What the hell is water?””

Like any good parable, the story has multiple applications. In many of the conversations we have about ethics and leadership, the parable speaks to the invisible sea of norms, beliefs, values and responsibilities that we all swim through.

Foster Wallace ends his commencement speech by encouraging students to live with the awareness that their encounters with information, people, ideas and systems are all mediated by these invisible influences. “This is water”, he repeats - almost as a mantra - inviting us to see what it is we’re all moving through.

For many public servants, this allegory might feel inadequate. As we’ve discussed throughout this series, the challenges public servants face are often very visible. The challenge isn’t seeing the water they swim in; the challenge is that the current often feels too strong to swim *against*.

Thus far in the Ethics in Action series, we’ve explored some of the ethical skills that today’s public servants require so they can manage the ethical risks that sit at the heart of their craft. These include skills like the ability to recognise different ethical reasoning styles and communicate through them; to move through dilemmas around professional identity and personal values; to wield and navigate power dynamics without succumbing to the temptation to be ‘effective’ at all costs.

However, it would be irresponsible to close the story here. It is easy to place ethical responsibility on individuals to be more capable of navigating dilemmas, resolving values disputes and resisting temptation. It’s much harder to see how these dilemmas, disputes and temptations are baked into the systems in which those individuals operate. To follow Foster Wallace’s analogy, the work of leadership isn’t just to swim against the current; it’s to change the direction in which it flows, and to understand whether or not the water is healthy in the first place.

The water we swim in

Let's start with something uncontroversial. In order to know whether there is something wrong within a system, you have to know what that system looks like when it is healthy. The younger goldfish can only answer the older goldfish's question if they know two things. First, that they are swimming in water at all. And second, what the water is *supposed* to be like, so that they can make a value judgement about how it is at the moment.

This seems straightforward when we're talking about goldfish - it's considerably more complex in a system as vast, intricate and interconnected as the public service. Still, despite the challenge, the need remains the same. Public servants need to be aware that they are swimming in a water of their own: beliefs, habits, heuristics, structures and relationships that frame how they lead teams, design policy, deliver services, engage with community and provide advice to government.

"This is water."

For example, many public servants tell us about their ethical responsibilities in the context of the need to be 'apolitical'. Fewer are able to recognise that the way that 'apolitical' has come to be understood within their part of the public service was invented by humans and so it may not be a perfect representation of the ideal and can be changed.

Last year, Cranlana ran a thought experiment with some senior public servants, in which I asked them to design a work environment in which it would be more likely for people to act unethically, without ever being aware that they were doing so. They took to the task with glee - rattling off a host of devilish interventions.

I asked them at what point they had stopped describing a fictional workplace, and started describing their *own* workplace. "Almost immediately," they said with a collective laugh. It took a lot of work to get them to realise that - as a leadership team within a department - it was possible for them to change this; that it was their responsibility to do so. The 'broken systems' that many people feel they work within aren't *necessarily* broken. Often, they're broken because nobody believes they can be fixed, because nobody has cared to try.

"This is water."

How's the water?

Max Roser is the founder of [Our World in Data](https://ourworldindata.org/), whose mission is "to publish the "research and data to make progress against the world's largest problems." Roser and his team aim to make huge amounts of information more accessible to people who are responsible for addressing some of the most pressing issues humanity faces. It's not enough to know that 'this is water' - we also need to know how the water is. Is it conducive to health and flourishing, or is it dangerous?

Roser believes that working with large amounts of seemingly disconnected data provides a nuanced answer to this question. He [argues](#) that three seemingly incompatible things are all true at the same time: "The world is awful. The world is much better. The world can be much better."

However, data alone can't tell us any of these three things. Whether something is awful, better, or could be better still is an exercise of judgement. Data can only tell us the way the world is. It cannot tell us the way the world *should* be.

Returning to the public service, the lesson seems clear. It isn't enough to know that there are habits, conventions, norms and ideas that shape how public servants understand their responsibilities and conduct their work. The public service - both as a collective, and as each individual within that collective - requires a sense of what it is *supposed* to be.

Water is for drinking

If at this point you're asking 'where are we, and how did we get here?' I don't blame you. We started this series of columns looking at the various ethical capabilities that public servants need in order to meet their responsibilities within the various systems in which they work.

Yet, in some cases it's possible that the greatest challenge to ethical public service practice *is* the system itself. Improving individual capability without addressing those systemic flaws won't enhance the capability of the public service to conduct its work ethically and effectively. Leaders therefore need to see the systems in which they operate, and make a judgement about whether those systems support or undermine who the public service is supposed to be, and how it is supposed to work.

The question that naturally follows from this is: how are you supposed to do that? We'll look into that in more detail next week, but for now, it's worth noting that this question also reveals some of the water we swim in. For example, the belief in certain, digestible, and readily-applied answers to complex questions is part of the water we swim in. Like the Our World in Data project, we often assume the world is knowable, explainable and therefore 'solvable'. So, if public servants need to have a sense of how the service is meant to function, the temptation is to give them an answer (hopefully in the form of a model that fits neatly on a single slide).

Yet the best inoculant against an unthinking public service, who drift away from their core purpose because of the invisible currents in which they swim is for the service - and individual public servants - to continually ask this question for themselves.

As Foster Wallace warned twenty years ago, "the alternative is unconsciousness, the default setting, the rat race, the constant gnawing sense of having had, and lost, some infinite thing."

Leaders, managers, secretaries, commissioners and staff at all levels have to keep asking themselves what they are swimming in, and where the current is taking them. This is more than a career's work. It's more than a life's work. It's an ongoing, intergenerational dialogue between the past, the present and the future. It's also the stuff that sustains, gives life, and enables growth - we can drink it with far more confidence than the water we spend most of our time in.

Matt Beard is the Program Director of the Vincent Fairfax Fellowship at Cranlana Centre for Ethical Leadership. This article is part of a series exploring the meaning and value of ethical capability in the Australian Public Service.

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