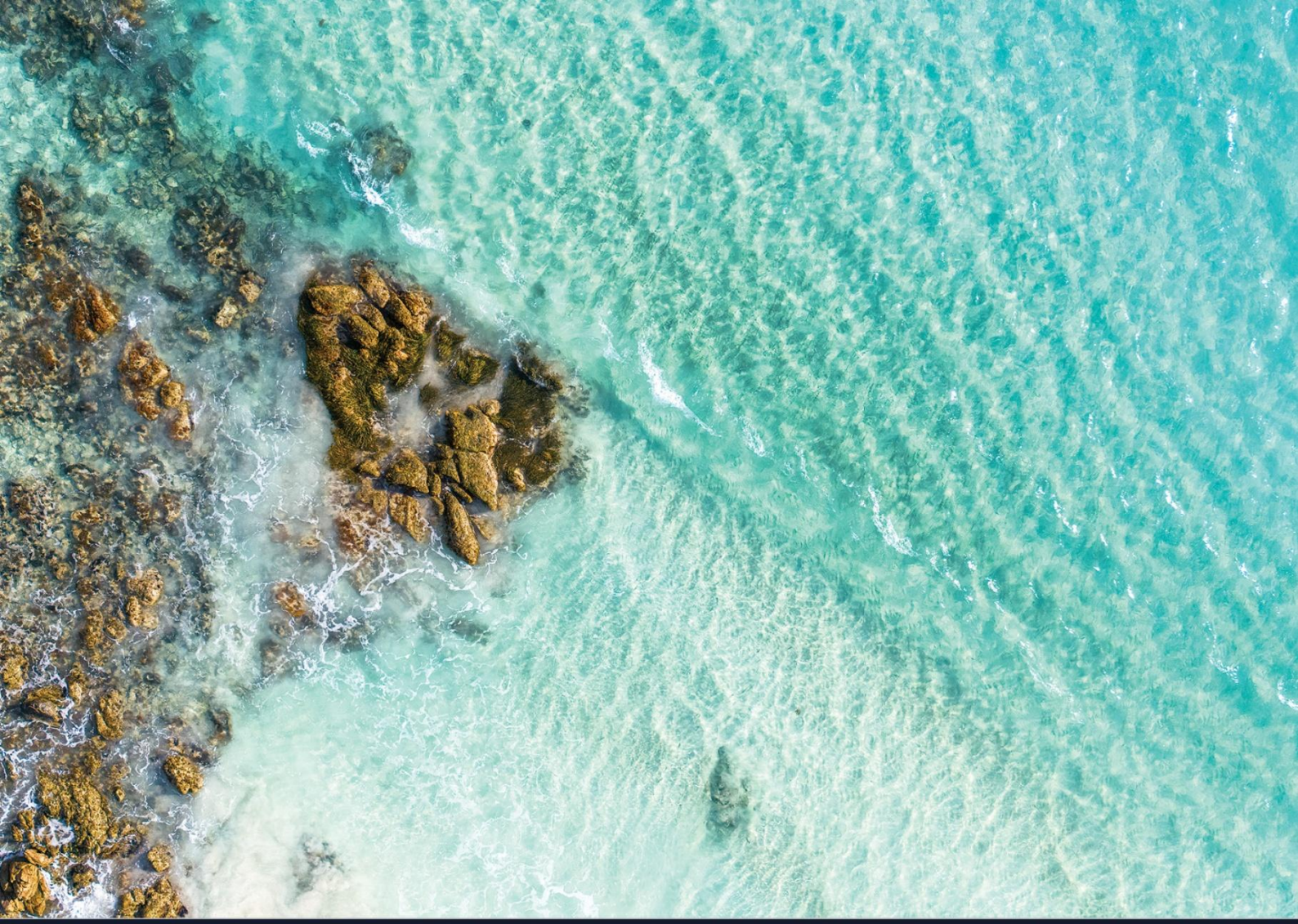

Improving Public Sector Integrity Through Action Research

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ANZ SOG Australia & New Zealand School Of Government

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Building a strong pro-integrity culture is a priority for the Victorian public sector, as it is for other states and the federal public sectors and demonstrated in comprehensive integrity frameworks and rules. At the same time, general models of organisational culture change suggest that lasting shifts in values and behaviours emerge not only from formal rules but from prolonged interaction and co-creation of meaning among members. One approach to building shared understanding and embedding integrity as a lived organisational norm is using *action research* as a participatory, iterative, and reflexive approach to inquiry. Action research refers to a cyclical process of inquiry aimed at both understanding and improving practice and combines systematic investigation with practical intervention, typically carried out by or with practitioners in their own settings. It enables employees to engage directly in diagnosing the current organisational culture, reflecting on shared experiences, and collaboratively envisioning and enacting change.

This research, co-sponsored and co-facilitated by the Australia and New Zealand School of Government and the Victorian Public Sector Commission, used action research to identify and develop promising examples of integrity-as-practice and pro-integrity interventions in four Victorian government agencies. These interventions were trialled and refined over 8 months to demonstrate how shared norms and understandings of integrity can be cultivated through everyday practices and interactions. In addition, key lessons were drawn on what systems need to be in place for practitioners to develop actionable practices for pro-integrity culture. The project was designed with the goal of embedding *promising practices* (see dedicated report: Mussagulova, Goodwin and Wang, 2025) throughout the Victorian public sector through the development of case studies and content for sector-wide culture of integrity guidance.

The four action research projects (see Part 3) were developed from the ground up from within four agencies. Each project was distinctive in scope and focus:

- In order to understand **speak up culture** across a large and dispersed school workforce, the action research project in the Department of Education elicited school leaders and school staff perspectives to generate insights to inform future resources and policy.
- With the goal of promoting **everyday integrity practices**, the project run in the Department of Health sought to embed integrity discussions into existing meeting structures across two work areas over a trial period, finding that normalising integrity as an everyday topic shifted how staff understood and engaged with it.
- The action research undertaken by the Department of Justice and Community Safety trialled an **integrity risk self-assessment tool** with the Sheriff's Office of Victoria, working through integrity risks together in cross-level groups to integrate knowledge and frank reflections.
- In the Department of Transport and Planning, a **network of voluntary integrity champions** distributed across the organisation was established, with the research finding that peer-based approaches extended the reach of the central integrity team and began to shift integrity from a centralised function to a shared organisational responsibility.

The key lessons (Part 4) emerging from across the four action research projects point to a view of integrity culture as a collective, relational, and adaptive achievement — a culture that cannot be realised through directive or mandate or delivered through training alone. This central finding is that integrity is best understood as a relational practice. Where structured spaces for dialogue were created, participants moved integrity from an abstract compliance requirement to a lived, shared responsibility — built through everyday interactions, mutual accountability, and collective sense-making. This finding has direct implications for how integrity interventions are designed: approaches that engage staff as active participants in identifying and responding to integrity challenges consistently produced richer, more actionable insights than top-down or survey-based methods.

The projects also clarified an important distinction between systems and culture, and between individual knowledge and collective practice. Systems and processes are not an alternative to culture change, they are its foundation, where they create the conditions of trust and shared understanding from which deeper behavioural and cultural change can follow.

Leadership emerged as a critical but nuanced enabler for the interventions. Executive endorsement provided an authorising environment and signalled organisational seriousness, but momentum consistently depended on mid-level managers and peer champions translating that mandate into everyday practice. Where this distributed leadership was absent, the impact of interventions was limited regardless of seniority of sponsorship.

Finally, the projects underscored that context matters, sustainability must be deliberately designed in, and honest reflection on what did not work is itself *a form of integrity practice*.

Together, these lessons offer a practical framework for public sector organisations seeking to build pro-integrity cultures that are durable, contextually grounded, and genuinely embedded in the way people work.

1. INTRODUCTION

Integrity is a crucial aspect of "good governance" (Huberts et al., 2014). It helps build public trust (Lewis & Gilman, 2012), sustain legitimacy (Cowell et al., 2011), improve the quality-of-service delivery (Bossaert & Demmke, 2005), and can even contribute to the overall happiness of citizens (Veenhoven, 2018). Because public servants are subject to intense public scrutiny, instances of integrity violations can significantly damage public trust, as demonstrated by the fallout from the Robodebt scandal, the PwC tax leak, the case of the former Home Affairs Secretary Mike Pezzullo, and the ATO whistleblower case.

Public sector leaders across Australia continuously voice their commitment to upholding the highest standards of integrity. In 2023, amidst a heightened and nationwide focus on integrity in the public sector resulting from issues like Robodebt, the Victorian Secretaries' Board released its Integrity Statement. In it, the Secretaries committed themselves and their departments to action that builds and maintains strong integrity cultures and ensures the provision of frank and fearless advice. Alongside the framework, the Victorian Public Sector Commission released its Public Sector Integrity Framework that guides how Victorian public sector agencies can build strong integrity performance and culture.

These products and actions recognise the need to build a strong pro-integrity culture that transcends individual integrity of public servants. Such culture is to go beyond mere compliance with rules and promotion of shared values, into the realm of firm actions and codified behaviours. This view is echoed in a recent study of Australian public sector integrity reviews by Australia and New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG)[1]. It poses a range of questions about how pro-integrity reforms translate into integrity in practice, given the complex nature of integrity itself – as a framework, a procedure, a value, and a behaviour.

Organisational culture, including a pro-integrity culture, is a combination of both formal and informal aspects and practices that work together to guide employees towards integrity in their behaviour (Trevino & Weaver, 2003). Building such a culture requires thus reliance on compliance-based and values-based approaches to integrity.

A **compliance-based approach to integrity** is grounded in contractual exchange theory (Homans, 1961). Expectations for behaviour are codified in ethical norms, compliance to which is enforced and deviations from which are sanctioned. The imposition of norms is top-down, making the essence of ethical conduct based on fear of sanctions rather than shared beliefs in the appropriateness of those norms. On the one hand, this might suggest inherent distrust of employees' character (Perlman, Reddick, & Demir, 2024), on the other hand this contributes to salience of ethical norms and expectations for behaviour (Weaver & Trevino, 1999) raising employee awareness of circumstances enabling ethical failures.

Values-based integrity approaches rest on the ideas of social exchange theory (Blau, 1964). According to this theory employees respond to organisational efforts aimed at supporting them by committing to organisational goals. This reciprocity enables ethical behaviour without the need to resort to sanctions or

[1] https://www.apsacademy.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-12/ANZSOG%20Integrity%20Project%202023.pdf

imposing rigid rules. One of the key components of an effective values-based integrity strategy is aspiration towards a consensus on what values should underpin behaviour (Perlman et al., 2024).

A compliance-based approach alone adds layers to already complex organisational structures which may lead to additional transaction costs and loss of efficiency (Webb, 2012). On the other hand, reliance solely on a values-based strategy may result in a suboptimal formulation of integrity goals and vague operationalisation, especially if the values are not shared or understood widely by employees. Further, shared values and practices underpin culture change (Silverzweig & Allen, 1976) which is an important aspect of ensuring integrity of any organisation.

1.1. Pro-Integrity Culture Change

Creating a desired culture requires (1) a systematic understanding of the existing culture, (2) establishing specific objectives, (3) modifying the existing cultural practices, and (4) sustaining the desired culture (Silverzweig & Allen, 1976). Pless and Maak (2004) describe culture change as a process of raising awareness, creating shared understanding, encouraging reflection, developing a vision, rethinking key principles and concepts, and adapting systems and processes to the desired vision of change. Consequently, stable and lasting institutional integrity systems are predicated on pursuing culture change based on creating a shared understanding of desired norms and a systematic approach to adapting existing systems and processes to those norms.

The approach to integrity in the public sector of Australia is a case in point. While public services across Australia have made significant strides in strengthening integrity through a compliance-based framework centred on awareness, capability, and accountability, the values-based dimension of integrity culture requires further analysis. What remains unclear is whether diverse public servants interpret the meaning of integrity values in a similar way and how they act upon their interpretation (de Vries & Kim, 2011). Understanding integrity practice requires attention to its informal and relational dimensions: how shared norms and understanding of ethical behaviour are cultivated through everyday interactions and collective sense-making.

General models of organisational culture change suggest that lasting shifts in values and behaviours emerge not only from formal rules but from prolonged interaction and co-creation of meaning among members (Silverzweig & Allen, 1976). Yet current integrity initiatives pay limited attention to this social process of meaning-making. This gap highlights the need for complementary approaches, for example, participatory methods that focus on building shared understanding and embedding integrity as a lived organisational norm rather than solely a matter of compliance.

Underpinning this project is a view of integrity that speaks directly to this gap. Drawing on Aristotelian ethics and practice theory, integrity can be understood as a relational practice, something that public servants do rather than something they have. Rather than a fixed trait or a checklist of prescribed behaviours, integrity is a practice that emerges through relationships, dialogue, and shared sense-making in everyday organisational life. This understanding reinforces the case for participatory approaches to integrity culture

change: if integrity is relational and practice-based, then strategies for strengthening it must be equally attentive to the informal, collective, and interactive dimensions of organisational life.

1.2. Action Research

Action research is a participatory approach to inquiry that engages practitioners directly in the process of identifying problems, designing responses, and reflecting on outcomes. Unlike conventional research methods that observe organisations from the outside, action research positions employees as co-investigators of their own practice, generating knowledge that is both contextually grounded and practically actionable. This makes it particularly well suited to the challenge of integrity culture change, where lasting shifts in values and behaviour depend not on external prescription but on the collective sense-making and shared commitment of the people within an organisation. It was on this basis that action research was selected as the methodological foundation for this project.

The primary vehicle through which the action research was conducted was the establishment of Communities of Practice (CoPs) within each of the four participating agencies. CoPs brought together employees from across different roles and levels within each agency to work collectively on integrity-related challenges relevant to their own organisational context.

The work of the CoPs forms the empirical core of this report. Their experiences, insights, and outputs are documented in detail in the case study section, and the lessons drawn from their work are synthesised in the final section of the report.

1.3. The Project: Aims and Approach

This project is a partnership between ANZSOG and the Victorian Public Sector Commission (VPSC) who act as co-sponsors and co-facilitators of the research process. This project used action research to identify and develop promising examples of integrity-as-practice and pro-integrity system changes in four Victorian government agencies and to test and refine these practices and systems with practitioners. The project was designed with the goal of embedding promising practices throughout the Victorian public sector through the development of case studies and content for sector-wide culture of integrity guidance.

This research project aimed to contribute to:

1) expanding understanding of the role of informal and relational dimensions of integrity: how shared norms and understandings of ethical behaviour are cultivated through everyday interactions and collective sense-making;

2) empowering practitioners to develop solutions that work in their context, by trialling some actionable practices that have the potential to be embedded and scaled up.

The project provided an opportunity to consider the following research questions:

- How can shared norms and understandings of integrity be cultivated through everyday practices and interactions?
- What systems (including leadership support) need to be in place for practitioners to develop actionable practices for pro-integrity culture?

This project set out to investigate how action research could be used as a vehicle for building pro-integrity cultures within Victorian state government. Rather than imposing pre-designed integrity frameworks from the outside, the project was grounded in the principle that lasting culture change requires the active participation of the people and organisations it seeks to change. Working across four Victorian government agencies, the research team partnered with agency staff to identify integrity challenges, co-design responses, and test practical interventions in real organisational settings.

Importantly, the project was not evaluating whether agencies were doing integrity well or poorly. Rather, it was interested in how integrity cultures develop and can be strengthened through deliberate, participatory, and reflective practice, and what that process looks like in practice.

This project was undertaken under ethics approval from the University of Sydney Human Ethics Committee (approval number 2024/HE001127).

1.4. Structure of this Report

This report is structured to take the reader from conceptual foundations through to practical lessons. Following this introduction, the report proceeds as follows.

Section 2 sets out the methodological and theoretical framework underpinning the project. It introduces integrity as a relational practice, drawing on Aristotelian ethics and practice theory, before explaining how action research was selected as the most appropriate method for studying and strengthening integrity in organisational contexts. The section also describes how the action research was designed and implemented across the four participating agencies.

Section 3 presents four case studies, one from each action research Community of Practice. Each case study documents the project undertaken, the integrity challenges identified, the interventions that work co-designed, and the outcomes achieved. Breakout boxes are included throughout to highlight transferable approaches and practical tools that may be of value to other public sector organisations.

Section 4 draws on a short survey administered to participants before and after the project to capture reflections on experiences of the action research process. This section also presents shifts in understandings and approaches to integrity over the course of the project, and participant perspectives on the conditions that support culture change.

Section 5 synthesises the key lessons emerging from the project as a whole, with particular attention to the work of the Communities of Practice. It identifies the insights and approaches most likely to be transferable across the Victorian public sector and reflects on what this project contributes to our understanding of how pro-integrity cultures can be built and sustained.

2. ACTION RESEARCH

A starting point for this project is a view of integrity that goes beyond individual character or rule compliance. Drawing on Aristotle's concept of practical wisdom, or *phronesis*, Van Steden (2020) argues that good public sector practice is not simply a matter of following rules, but of doing things well and wisely. On this view, moral excellence is not achieved through abstract reasoning alone but emerges through action, experience, and reflection: through the everyday judgments people make, the ways they interact with others, and how they respond to concrete situations.

This Aristotelian insight is developed further by practice theorists such as Nicolini (2013), who argue that organisational life is constituted through practices or patterns of action and interaction through which social reality is produced. Applied to integrity, this lens enables us to understand integrity as something public servants do rather than something they have. Practices are inherently collective and relational, existing through cooperation, shared understanding, and interaction. As Van Steden (2020) puts it, practical knowledge "draws upon a shared 'we' - a community of people - with collective values about how they make and do things" (p. 239). This sits comfortably alongside a values-based approach to organisational integrity, which is similarly grounded in shared, collective norms rather than individual compliance.

These perspectives point towards integrity as a relational practice, something that emerges through relationships and interactions with colleagues, stakeholders, and the public, and that is sustained by and contributes to **dialogue, mutual accountability, and trust.** Fostering a pro-integrity culture in public service, on this account, depends as much on nurturing these relational dynamics as on formal compliance mechanisms.

The following section describes how this approach was designed and implemented across the four participating Victorian government agencies.

2.1. Action Research for Culture Change

Action research offers a structured approach to developing cultural change in organisations through experimentation, reflection and learning. The approach is distinctive in its collaborative and participatory nature and was enabled through the authentic involvement of stakeholders. Rather than a methodology, action research is “an orientation to inquiry with an obligation to action” (Groundwater-Smith and Irwin, 2011). It is **practical**, leading to the development and improvement of policy and practice, **participative** of practitioners and stakeholders, and **particular** in seeking to illuminate the local and contextual rather than produce generalisable results.

Action research aligns closely with the processes of cultural transformation discussed earlier. Because action research is inherently participatory, iterative, and reflexive, it enables employees to engage directly in diagnosing the current culture, reflecting on shared experiences, and collaboratively envisioning and enacting change. This approach fosters the shared understanding of desired norms and the systematic adaptation of systems and practices that Silverzweig and Allen (1976) and Pless and Maak (2004) identify as

essential to culture change. Moreover, by empowering participants to identify integrity challenges, experiment with locally appropriate interventions, and collectively reflect on outcomes, action research strengthens both individual and collective ownership of integrity norms. This relational and empowering process not only embeds integrity principles into everyday work practices but also cultivates the trust, open dialogue, and shared responsibility that are critical for sustaining a pro-integrity culture over time.

Despite its clear suitability for fostering cultural and behavioural change, action research has rarely been applied to the study or practice of strengthening institutional integrity. Most existing approaches to integrity management and reform focus on compliance mechanisms, ethics training, or organisational audits, which tend to emphasise rule adherence rather than participatory learning and systemic adaptation.

In addition, notably missing from both practitioner and academic efforts on improving integrity is a co-design approach. This gap is particularly striking given that values-based integrity is grounded in reciprocity — a principle that inherently calls for communities of practice to be active participants in shaping strategy, designing interventions, scaling best practices, and identifying effective tools. An action research approach engaging employees as experts directly in the pro-integrity culture change process can promote autonomy and competence and facilitate lasting culture change.

The relational aspect of this approach is particularly critical for projects concerned with changing organisational culture. This is because organisational culture is constantly in process: it is not something organisations have; it is something that individuals convey to each other through interactions and language every single day. In addition, action research provides opportunities for practitioners to co-create knowledge and integrate theory and practice in ways that are unique and practical in particular contexts.

2.2. Research Process

2.2.1. *Context and Case Selection*

To establish the Communities of Practice, the VPSC issued a call for proposals from across VPS agencies for action research projects addressing integrity challenges. Out of all the submitted applications four were selected based on their motivation, relevance, clarity and a sound plan for action. The four proposals selected were from the following agencies: Department of Education (DE), Department of Health (DH), Department of Justice and Community Safety (DJCS), and Department of Transport and Planning (DTP). Each of these agencies had a well-defined integrity challenge and a proposal for change.

Prior to commencing the action research, the research team conducted a review of promising practices for pro-integrity culture building across Australian and international public sector agencies (Mussagulova, Goodwin and Wang, 2025), the key findings of which were shared with participating agencies in the initial project workshop to inform their selection and shaping of integrity interventions to trial.

2.2.2. Communities of Practice

A key element of the action research process in the VPSC project was the establishment of a Community of Practice in each of four public sector sites. Communities of Practice are groups of people who share a common concern, profession, or passion and who learn how to do it better through regular and intentional interaction (Lave & Wenger, 1991). CoPs are characterised by three key elements: a shared domain of interest that gives members a sense of joint enterprise; a community in which members build relationships, share experiences, and support each other; and a practice, meaning the shared repertoire of tools, stories, and ways of doing things developed over time. In organisational and public sector contexts, CoPs function as spaces for peer learning, knowledge exchange, and innovation, helping bridge silos, spread good practices, and strengthen collective capacity for problem-solving.

The CoP model was chosen deliberately. Unlike top-down training or compliance programmes, CoPs position employees as experts in their own work environments, people who understand the informal norms, relational dynamics, and practical pressures that shape how integrity is enacted day to day. By creating structured spaces for dialogue, reflection, and collaborative problem-solving, the CoPs enabled participants to move beyond abstract discussions of integrity towards concrete, context-sensitive action.

Each CoP operated over the course of the project with support from the research team, who took on a facilitative rather than directive role. This meant that while the research team provided conceptual framing and methodological guidance, the agenda and priorities of each CoP were driven by the participants themselves. This approach reflects the values-based understanding of integrity that underpins the project, one that sees integrity as a relational and collective achievement rather than an individual or procedural one.

In each agency, Communities of Practice consisted of at least 5-10 practitioners and managers, and the University researchers, with numbers depending on context and agency conditions. Each Community of Practice also had project leads responsible for coordinating the project. A project sponsor within the agency provided authorisation and institutional support for the Communities of Practice. The VPSC provided introductions, oversight, inputs on intervention development and integrity strategy, as well as overall institutional commitment.

- CoPs consisted of at least 5-10 practitioners and managers, with numbers depending on context and agency conditions.
- The University of Sydney Researchers were active members of the Communities of Practice.
- Each CoP had a Project lead/s responsible for implementing the project

Each CoP has and a project sponsor/s in the organisation who endorsed the work of the CoP, tying the benefits of the CoP to the organisation's strategic objectives.

2.2.3. *Action Research Cycle*

The Action Research project **cycles of action and reflection** were undertaken over a period of 8 months, beginning with the establishment of ways of working and scoping and refining an intervention to be trialled or implemented.

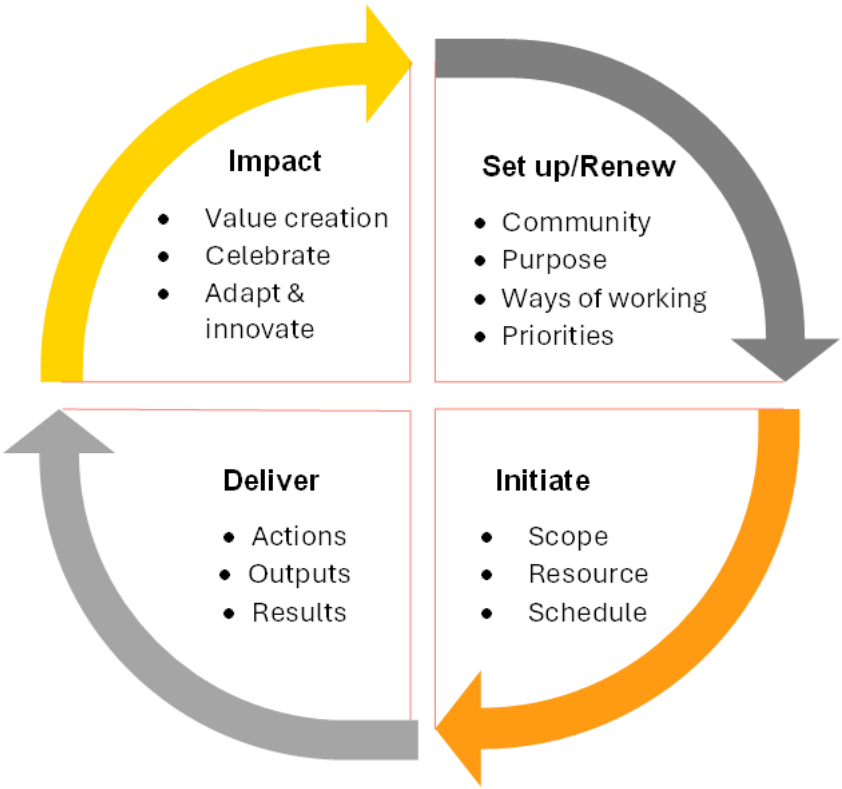
The interventions were accompanied by **data collection** processes that varied by site, and included questionnaires, focus groups, individual interviews, organisational data analysis, and co-design methods. Community of Practice members used **collaborative data analysis** methods to develop findings from data collected through these research processes. Detailed **case studies** were developed by the individual Communities of Practice that reported on evaluations of impact and value creation.

The final action and reflection stage involved all four Communities of Practice presenting their Case Studies and reflecting on the project, combining their expertise with stakeholders from ANZSOG and the VPSC to contribute to broader thinking and action about pro-integrity culture change.

2.2.4. *Action Research Phases*

The action research process was organised into distinct phases that accorded with a Community of Practice Lifecycle derived from the literature on implementing communities of practices in other organisations.

Diagram 1: The COP Lifecycle



The Phases in our project included whole-of-project workshops at the start and end of the process, and intensive preparatory and action research phases.

Phases	Activity
Kick-off Workshop	**Setting the Scene** • Overview of ANZSOG/VPSC project aims • Introduction to Action Research Methodology • Proposal overviews from participating agencies
Preparation Phase	**Preliminary Groundwork** • Completion of project templates on key integrity challenges, potential interventions, necessary resources/support • Proposal guidance from VPSC & research team. • Identification CoP members and Project Leads and key contacts. • Endorsement from agency sponsor
	Community of Practice Set-up • Establish Purpose • Decide Ways of Working • Set Priorities for Action
	Action Research Project Design • Scope the Research Project • Finalise project resources and materials Schedule Activities.
Action Research Phase	**Implement Action Research** • Undertake background research • Implement Intervention Activities • Undertake data collection • Collate results
	Evaluate and Reflect on Research Activities • Co-analysis of quantitative & qualitative data • Identification of intervention impact/value creation • Write up detailed Case Studies (based on OECD Public Sector Innovation case study template)
Showcase Workshop	**Present and Reflect on Case Studies** • All projects presented Case Studies • Reflections from ANZSOG and VPSC

3. FINDINGS

3.1. Communities of Practice and Interventions

3.1.1. *Integrity Interventions Trialled*

The following four case studies document the action research undertaken by each agency's Community of Practice (CoP) over the course of the project. Each case study describes the integrity challenge the CoP set out to address, the intervention they designed and implemented, and the key findings that emerged from the process.

The CoP in the Department of Education explored how to build a speak up culture across schools. The CoP in the Department of Health embedded integrity conversations into everyday meeting and communication practices across two work areas. In the Department of Justice and Community Safety, the CoP trialled and refined an integrity risk self-assessment tool with the Sheriff's Office of Victoria. The Department of Transport and Planning CoP established a network of voluntary integrity champions distributed across the organisation.

While each agency pursued a distinct approach reflecting its own organisational context and priorities, together the case studies illustrate a broader set of insights about what it takes to build and sustain a pro-integrity culture in the Victorian public sector. Each case study concludes by highlighting the most transferable approaches and practical lessons for other public sector organisations.

3.1.2. *Building a Speak Up Culture in Schools*

The Department of Education wanted to better understand the challenges for school leaders in building a speak up culture and find out what supports, resources and guidance the department could provide schools to help address those challenges. The department's integrity reform work is necessarily undertaken in the context of its multiple workforces: a corporate workforce and a more autonomous and dispersed workforce of school staff based in roughly 1,600 Victorian government schools.

The 'Building a Speak Up Culture in Schools' intervention involved bringing a sample of school leaders together in two online focus groups. The focus groups included principals, assistant principals and school business managers, who collectively have core responsibilities in the purchase of goods and services, management of budgets, compliance reporting, and recruitment and staff conduct matters. These leaders undertake high-integrity risk functions and have oversight of key decisions involving public money and employment and have an obligation to inform their staff of their obligations to report unethical behaviour. In addition, a survey for school leaders to share with school staff explored what staff need from their leaders to feel safe to speak up within their school.

The focus group discussions elicited information on four themes: Awareness, Benefits, Barriers, and Support:

Awareness: Knowledge of the department's speak up service; understanding obligations according to the Victorian Code of Conduct for public sector employees; and the role of school leaders to 'walk the talk' and encourage colleagues to feel safe to speak up were understood as critical for creating cultural change. The department's staff induction resources and Integrity Leadership Group program supported leaders' understanding of employee obligations, channels for action and communications for engagement.

Benefits: A strong speak up culture in schools results in better decision making, improved staff morale and retention, and positive individual employee workplace experiences.

Barriers: School staff may lack for time or willingness to engage in reporting processes due to competing priorities and mental health considerations, where staff anticipate stressful and protracted processes that may not result in a desired or visible outcome. Fears of social and career implications, local school culture norms and lack of relational trust in the context of structural and power imbalances were discussed. Perceptions of a lack of anonymity and privacy were also highlighted.

Support: School staff had suggestions for resourcing psychologically safe environments, making access to information about support and resources more accessible, providing further support for staff who speak up, and mandating integrity training modules.

The CoP found that action research with practitioners generates rich and candid data that can be used to support schools. Focus groups with school leaders and the tailored survey of school staff perceptions was more useful for informing integrity reform activity than one-size-fits all surveys or audits.

This intervention could be applied to other public sector organisations that have oversight of sub-organisations that are relatively autonomous, such as in health care.

TRANSFERABLE APPROACHES — DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
The Intervention in Brief
The Department of Education integrity team brought together school leaders in online focus groups to understand barriers to speak up culture in schools, complemented by a staff survey exploring what school employees need from leaders to feel safe to speak up.
What Worked
Engaging school leaders directly in focus groups generated richer, more candid insights than organisation-wide surveys or audits.
Tailoring data collection to the dual-workforce context of schools produced more actionable findings for integrity reform activities.
Connecting speak up culture to concrete leadership responsibilities made integrity tangible and relevant for participants.
Key Enablers
Active engagement between a centralised integrity team and relatively autonomous state-wide distribution of schools and regional support teams
School staff and leaders willing to reflect candidly on barriers for staff to report including power imbalances, lack of trust, and fears of career consequences and offering of impartial reporting options
Leverage from existing integrity training programs that provide a foundation for integrity conversations and access to resources and support.
Watch Out For
Structural and power imbalances within schools can significantly inhibit speak up culture and need to be explicitly acknowledged rather than assumed away.

Staff concerns about anonymity and privacy are real barriers that process design needs to actively mitigate.
Try This In Your Organisation
This approach is particularly well suited to public sector organisations that oversee relatively autonomous sub-organisations, such as health services, TAFEs, or regulatory agencies. Consider pairing focus groups with leaders with a broader staff survey to capture both leadership and frontline perspectives. Ensure the design explicitly addresses power dynamics and perceived risks of speaking up before launching.

3.1.3. *Everyday Integrity Discussions*

The Department of Health's Everyday Integrity project trialled the integration of integrity discussions into existing staff engagement processes. In two 'work areas' within the agency and over an 8-week period, integrity was raised in executive level meetings, branch huddles, unit meetings, and team meetings as well as in written communications.

The aims of the Everyday Integrity project were to:

- normalise integrity conversations
- build ethical muscle in decision making
- encourage a speak up, listen up and follow up environment in the organisation.

The Community of Practice designed discrete Everyday Integrity programs for each work area where specific pro-integrity conversations could be inserted. In both work areas leaders at all levels were asked to drive the conversations about integrity and to demonstrate that talking about integrity - and acting when someone speaks up - is part of their everyday work.

People leaders were provided with a range of resources, including common integrity scenarios, to guide discussions. The project also encouraged informal story telling about personal experiences. In one of the work areas, a participatory design process drew on senior leaders' reflections on challenges they had faced to develop case studies.

Over the period of the trial, integrity was made a regular topic in meetings, huddles, and team catch-ups. The action research found that:

- Embedding integrity discussions into business-as-usual practices was seen as effective. Simply using the term "integrity" in meetings raised important conceptual conversations about integrity, such as defining and correcting the misconception that integrity is limited to fraud and corruption.
- The formal allocation of time to integrity conversations *and* senior leaders speaking about integrity raised the integrity awareness in the two work areas.
- The resources provided by the Integrity Unit enabled team leaders to start organic conversations about integrity in meetings.
- Co-developed case studies were helpful tools for sparking discussion and making integrity issues relatable.

The short duration of this project, however, did not guarantee that routine conversations about integrity would not fall off the agenda. Suggestions for sustaining and maintaining these practices included embedding integrity as a standing agenda item, disseminating monthly reminders to staff to have integrity conversations, and more visibility of the Integrity Unit throughout the organisation.

The Everyday Integrity intervention would be transferable to other public sector organisations, particularly with resources developed from the ground up and tailored to that workplace. The intervention found that senior leadership endorsement was critical for securing engagement across the agencies and branches.

TRANSFERABLE APPROACHES — DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

The Intervention in Brief

Over an eight-week period, integrity discussions were embedded into existing staff engagement processes, including executive meetings, team huddles, and written communications, with leaders at all levels asked to drive conversations about integrity as part of their everyday work.

What Worked

- Embedding integrity into business-as-usual meetings normalised it as an organisational topic rather than a compliance exercise.
- Simply using the word "integrity" in meetings opened up important conceptual conversations, including correcting the widespread misconception that integrity is limited to fraud and corruption.
- Co-developed case studies drawn from senior leaders' own experiences were effective tools for making integrity issues relatable and sparking genuine discussion.
- Providing team leaders with practical resources, including integrity scenarios, enabled organic conversations without requiring specialist knowledge.

Key Enablers

- Senior leadership endorsement was critical for securing engagement across branches and teams.
- Resources developed from the ground up and tailored to the specific workplace context rather than generic materials.
- Formal allocation of time to hold integrity conversations signalled organisational seriousness and gave permission for the topic to be raised.

Watch Out For

- Without deliberate sustainability mechanisms, integrity conversations risk falling off the agenda once the trial period ends.
- The intervention depends heavily on leaders being willing and confident to raise integrity topics which requires preparation and support.

Try This In Your Organisation

This intervention is highly transferable and relatively low-cost to implement. Start by mapping existing meeting structures and identifying where integrity conversations could be inserted without adding new processes. Develop a small bank of locally relevant scenarios and case studies before launch. Critically, build in sustainability from the outset: make integrity a standing agenda item, establish a regular reminder cycle, and maintain visibility of the integrity team throughout the organisation beyond the initial trial period.

3.1.4. *Strengthening Integrity in the Sherriff's Office of Victoria*

The Department of Justice and Community Safety aimed to test and improve the Integrity Risk Self-assessment Tool. The tool is designed to be used by the leadership of a business unit with minimal input and support from a central integrity unit.

There are eight risk categories in the Integrity Risk Self-Assessment tool:

- Misuse of information or systems
- Improper use/theft of assets
- Financial mismanagement
- Misuse of authority
- Circumventing merit processes,
- Duty failure
- Disrespectful behaviour, bullying, assault or harassment
- Child abuse and harm

The Self-Assessment tool suggests the business unit can choose to focus on the 3-4 most significant integrity risks. The Regional Executives and Deputy Sheriffs decided to focus on the misuse of information or systems, misuse of authority, duty failure and disrespectful behaviour as their four key risks.

The Self-Assessment tool includes lists of integrity enabling and inhibiting behaviours (green and red flags, respectively), cultures and business practices connected to each of the integrity risk categories.

Trialling this tool with a complex unit - the Sheriff's Office Victoria – provided an opportunity to test and strengthen the tool before introducing it across the agency. Sheriff's Office is a large operational unit with multiple regions, it had a layered leadership structure spanning executive directors, deputy sheriffs, regional managers and sergeants, and it operates in a high-integrity-risk environment with significant frontline responsibilities.

The Community of Practice convened two region-based working groups led by the Regional Executive Directors, Deputy Sheriffs, and Regional Managers, to trial the self-assessment tool. Each group ran a workshop to analyse their risk profile across the four risks areas using the self-assessment tool. They discussed the potential impacts and consequences if each risk were to occur and assessed the likelihood of occurrence on a scale from almost certain to rare. They also examined other issues and risks emerging from

the broader information available to ensure a comprehensive assessment was captured. They made a plan to mitigate the risks they identified through this process. Ground-up feedback and the conversations between all levels of leadership brought to surface integrity risks beyond simply filling out a tool. The Executive Director and Deputy Sheriffs gave frank feedback to the Community of Practice to help fine tune the self-assessment tool.

The main conditions for success identified by the Community of Practice were leadership commitment by senior/executive leadership to ensure that business areas feel empowered to prioritise the action research. Mid-level leadership was also important to drive the process. Support from the Integrity team was also key to provide guidance throughout the process to ensure success.

This intervention shows the importance of the foundation of clear formal rules of integrity, but also of leadership-buy in and relational practices.

TRANSFERABLE APPROACHES — DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE AND COMMUNITY SAFETY

The Intervention in Brief

The agency trialled its Integrity Risk Self-Assessment Tool with the Sheriff's Office of Victoria using two region-based working groups to test and refine the tool before broader rollout across the agency.

What Worked

- Having a tool with a comprehensive list of red and green flags, to provide an easy-to-use framework for in-depth and real conversations about the integrity risks and the culture around them.
- Trialling the tool with an engaged complex, high-risk unit provided rigorous real-world testing conditions and produced frank, detailed feedback that desk-based development could not have generated.
- Convening cross-level working groups, including executive directors, deputy sheriffs, and regional managers, brought multiple perspectives to the surface and produced richer insights than a single-level consultation would have.
- The process of working through the tool together surfaced integrity risks and conversations that went well beyond the mechanics of filling out a form.

Key Enablers

- Commitment from senior and executive leadership to signal that the process was a genuine priority worth engaging with seriously.
- Mid-level leadership actively driving participation and creating the conditions for frank discussion.
- Ongoing support from the integrity team to provide guidance and ensure the process stayed on track.

Watch Out For

- Self-assessment tools are only as effective as the culture of candour around them. Without psychological safety and leadership commitment, participants may default to safe or aspirational answers rather than honest ones.
- The four risks reviewed by the business unit represent a subset of the tool's full integrity risk taxonomy, organisations adopting a similar approach should consider how business units should choose which risks to prioritise, think about how the other risks will be covered off, and be transparent about what is not being assessed.

Try This In Your Organisation

If your organisation has an existing integrity risk tool or framework, consider piloting it with a complex or high-risk business unit before broader rollout - the stress-testing will improve both the tool and the conditions for its use. Structure the trial around cross-level working groups rather than individual responses and treat the conversations the tool generates as valuable data in their own right, not just the completed assessments.

3.1.5. *Department of Transport and Planning: Integrity Network*

The community of practice in this agency trialled a network of integrity 'champions' as local points of contact within the wider organisation. Like occupational health and safety representatives 'on the ground', localising can support the corporate function with promoting key messages. Local integrity champions are distributed across organisations in voluntary roles rather than formal positions. The Integrity Network provided a unique opportunity to bring together individuals interested in furthering organisational integrity and to share information and inspire others.

Members of the Integrity Network:

- Attend quarterly network seminars coordinated by Integrity and Ethical Behaviour and share integrity communications and key messages with staff.
- Provide briefings to their business area on Integrity policy requirements and processes.
- Respond authoritatively to colleague enquiries on integrity policies and principles or refer them to relevant staff within Integrity and Ethical Behaviour for assistance.

Members of the Integrity Network are not responsible for:

- Dealing with or responding to reports or disclosures about corruption/integrity concerns.
- Investigating or collecting information relating to integrity investigations.
- Approving or signing off integrity declarations.

As part of the trial, Network members were provided with training and support. Regular Integrity Network meetings provided opportunities to learn more about integrity policies, procedures, and issues, and to consider emerging integrity challenges facing the public sector. Network members then took what they had learnt back to their business areas to build capability across the agency. As part of the trial, Network

members recorded their actions and interactions on integrity matters and a dedicated communication channel was established to support ad hoc sharing of interactions and to test questions arising with other members.

The Community of Practice found that the Integrity Network strengthened participants' knowledge on integrity matters and built up their confidence in applying new knowledge when engaging with colleagues in their business areas and teams. The Integrity Network has now been established as an ongoing activity of the agency.

This intervention is transferable to other agencies and can support the work of dedicated integrity teams and ease load. By seeding key messages and building capability in the workforce across the organisation, building a network of integrity champions may ultimately lead to improved integrity outcomes in the public sector.

TRANSFERABLE APPROACHES — DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORT AND PLANNING
The Intervention in Brief
The agency established a network of voluntary integrity champions distributed across the organisation modelled on occupational health and safety representatives to act as local points of contact, build integrity capability in their business areas, and extend the reach of the central integrity team.
What Worked
• Distributing integrity knowledge and capability across the organisation through peer champions extended the reach of the central integrity team without requiring additional dedicated resources.
• Regular network meetings built champions' confidence and knowledge over time, enabling them to engage credibly with colleagues on integrity matters.
• Establishing a dedicated communication channel allowed champions to share interactions, test questions with peers, and support each other between formal meetings.
• The network has been embedded as an ongoing departmental activity, demonstrating that the model is sustainable beyond an initial trial.
Key Enablers
• Clear role boundaries - specifying what champions are and are not responsible for - were essential for managing risk and ensuring champions did not overstep into investigative or formal decision-making territory.
• Training and ongoing support from the central integrity team to build champions' knowledge and confidence.
• Voluntary participation, which helped ensure champions were genuinely motivated rather than reluctant nominees.

Watch Out For
• Role boundary clarity is critical. Without it, champions may be drawn into situations, such as responding to disclosures or collecting information about potential misconduct, that expose them and the organisation to risk. Invest time upfront in defining and communicating what the role does and does not include.
• The effectiveness of the network depends on champions having sufficient time and organisational support to fulfil their role alongside their substantive duties. Voluntary roles can quietly deprioritise under workload pressure.
Try This In Your Organisation
A champion network is transferable to most public sector organisations and is particularly valuable for large or geographically dispersed agencies where a central integrity team cannot maintain regular visibility across all business areas. Before launching, invest in clear role design and boundary setting, and ensure the central integrity team has capacity to provide ongoing support and coordination. Consider how the network will be sustained and refreshed over time as champions move roles or leave the organisation.

3.2. CoP Reflections Before and After the Action Research Project

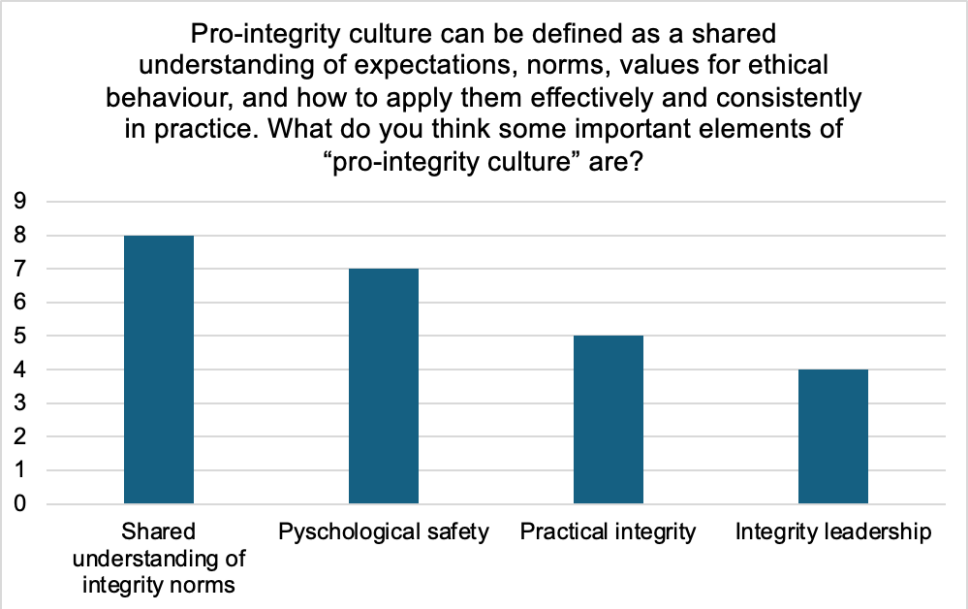
This section draws on surveys administered to CoP members before and after their participation in the action research project. The pre-CoP survey captured members' existing understanding of pro-integrity culture, their views on what their organisations needed to improve, and their expectations and concerns about the action research process. The post-CoP survey asked members to reflect on what had changed as a result of their participation: in their own understanding of integrity, in their organisations, and in their views on action research as a method for integrity culture change.

Together, the two surveys offer a window into how the experience of doing action research shaped the people who undertook it, and what conditions they identified as critical for future projects of this kind.

3.2.1. *What CoP Members Thought Before the Project*

Before the project began, CoP members had a clear and substantive understanding of what a pro-integrity culture requires. They identified four key elements: a shared understanding of integrity norms embedded in daily conduct rather than treated as a standalone compliance obligation; psychological safety – the confidence that raising concerns would be met with support rather than repercussion; practical integrity, meaning accessible policies, regular on-the-job conversations about integrity challenges and accessible policies and tools for addressing negative behaviour in the moment; and integrity leadership, characterised by leaders setting the tone, demonstrating integrity visibly, and making ethical decisions transparently.

Figure 2: Participant understandings of pro-integrity culture



When asked what their organisations needed to improve, members identified five priorities: greater awareness of integrity frameworks and how to implement them; regular integrity conversations embedded in everyday work and decision making; increased transparency in how decisions are made and communicated; stronger accountability at senior levels; and more targeted training across different roles and levels.

On action research itself, members anticipated both significant potential and real challenges. Half of respondents had previously participated in action research or a community of practice. Perceived benefits included the ability to generate real-time, contextually grounded data; opportunities for knowledge transfer and the development of self-help competencies; the potential to bring about behavioural change; and the value of collaboration and faster testing of initiatives before wider implementation. Anticipated challenges included time constraints and competing priorities, the potential for bias and subjectivity in participant reflections, difficulty measuring and quantifying outcomes, and the risk of insufficient leadership buy-in.

3.2.2 *What Changed After the Project*

The post-CoP survey suggests that participation in the action research meaningfully shifted how members understood and approached integrity in their work. A substantial majority (85%) reported that the project had changed the way they saw integrity challenges, with members describing increased awareness of integrity policies and frameworks, greater consciousness of practising integrity in everyday interactions, and a deeper understanding of how different organisational contexts require different approaches. As one respondent observed, the project made clear that "a single, one-size-fits-all approach does not work for integrity-related issues," a finding that resonates directly with the lessons emerging from the four case studies.

Members identified collaboration and shared reflection as the most valuable aspects of the action research process. Working together over time built trust and continuity; reflecting as a group strengthened planning and co-design; and sharing experiences reassured participants that they were "all on a learning journey together." These relational dimensions of the process were not merely procedural: they were experienced as integral to the learning itself, mirroring the broader finding that integrity is a relational practice built through interaction and shared sense-making.

The post-survey also confirmed the conditions that enabled or hindered effective participation. Leadership buy-in and support from the integrity team emerged as the two most critical enabling factors consistent with the evidence from the case studies. Barriers included time constraints, high workloads, competing priorities, and organisational restructures that disrupted momentum. A lack of team commitment was also cited as a challenge to sustained motivation.

3.2.3. *Advice for Future Projects*

When asked what advice they would offer for future action research projects on integrity, CoP members were consistent and direct. Leadership endorsement must be active and sustained throughout the lifecycle of the project, not merely given in principle at the outset and ideally, directors, managers, or executives should be part of the CoP itself rather than external sponsors. Dedicated time and resources must be

allocated, with clear expectations set from the beginning. A dedicated project lead is essential to maintain momentum, manage administration, and keep the team on track. And the work itself should be specific, measurable, and timebound, with findings shared beyond the immediate CoP to maximise the value of the learning generated.

4. KEY LESSONS

Across the four participating agencies, the action research projects generated rich, ground-level insight into what it takes to embed integrity into everyday public sector work. Each intervention, facilitated by a Community of Practice, demonstrated that integrity is not simply a matter of compliance or individual virtue. Rather, it is sustained through relationships, shared understanding, and collective practices. The use of action research facilitated the development of a practice-based account of what systems, resources, and conditions need to be in place to build a robust pro-integrity culture. The lessons below are drawn directly from the work of the four CoPs and are grounded in their findings, reflections, and, where indicated, the opinions of CoP members themselves.

4.1. Integrity as Relational Practice

The interventions consistently demonstrated that integrity is best understood as a relational practice enacted and sustained through social interaction rather than held by individuals alone. This was evident across all four agencies, though it manifested differently in each context. For instance:

- Members of one CoP found that simply using the word "integrity" in meetings opened up substantive conceptual conversations. This finding suggests that relational spaces for dialogue can shift how integrity is collectively understood, not just individually known.
- In a second CoP, we noted that conversations about integrity played a vital role in uncovering integrity risks beyond what any compliance mechanism could surface on its own. As the team observed, good practices in addressing integrity risks can be siloed and "can only be uncovered in collaborative working." The CoP format helped participants "discuss things they normally wouldn't have discussed."
- In a third CoP, interviews with the members revealed that participation helped build relationships across the agency, with some members noting they now "speak the same language" on integrity matters. One participant described how conversations about integrity had begun happening in their area where they had not happened before. As one CoP member put it: "It may seem small and irrelevant. But together it makes a change."
- In a fourth CoP, the survey of staff found stark differences in how staff experienced integrity culture depending on their local environment, a finding that underscores that integrity culture is not uniform across an organisation but is shaped by local relational dynamics and leadership norms.

These findings collectively point to a conclusion that integrity culture cannot be built through information dissemination alone. Shared understanding of integrity norms and values emerges through interaction, dialogue, and the repeated enactment of ethical commitments in everyday work.

4.2. Systems and Processes as a Foundation for Culture Change

A key insight to emerge from the action research, and one that directly addresses a tension in how integrity interventions are typically framed, is that systems and processes are not an alternative to culture change. They are its foundation. The evidence from the CoPs suggests that attention to systems and processes creates the conditions in which cultural and behavioural change becomes possible.

This was most clearly demonstrated in one CoP, where integrity discussions were deliberately embedded in systems and processes before moving to the more challenging discussions about behaviour and culture. As the CoP reflected, this sequencing "allowed the group to come together and develop trust with each other... creating a safer environment for more challenging conversations around behaviour and culture." This was not merely a facilitation technique; it reflected a deeper insight about how trust and psychological safety are built incrementally through structured shared work.

In a second CoP, the clear delineation of what CoP members were and were not responsible for was identified as a critical enabling condition. Without this structural clarity, the relational work of the CoP could not function safely or credibly.

In a third CoP, the survey found that confidence to speak up distinct from feeling psychologically safe to do so required foundational awareness of how and where to report, and belief that the process would lead to an outcome. As the one participant noted, "part of speaking up is about knowing that there is a process and seeing value in speaking up." Systems that are visible, accessible, and trusted are therefore prerequisites for the relational conditions that sustain a speak up culture.

The lesson across agencies is that culture change and systems improvement are not competing priorities but sequential ones. Organisations that attempt to build integrity culture without adequate systems and processes in place are likely to find that relational goodwill cannot compensate for structural deficits.

4.3. Individual Knowledge is Important but Not Sufficient

Related to the above, the action research evidence consistently shows that improving individual knowledge of integrity obligations while necessary does not by itself produce cultural change. This distinction is important because many existing integrity initiatives are designed primarily to build individual awareness and capability.

In one CoP, survey data showed that CoP members reported highest confidence in their own knowledge increase but lowest confidence in their ability to recommend trusted resources when faced with complex integrity questions. This gap between individual knowledge acquisition and the practical capacity to support others points to the limits of individually focused approaches.

In a second CoP, members honestly reflected, that the intervention did not always consistently translate into team-level behaviour change. Individual endorsement, even at a senior level, did not automatically produce collective practice.

In a third CoP, the survey distinguished between feeling safe to speak up - a cultural and relational condition and having confidence to speak up - a knowledge and systems condition. The data showed that even staff with strong knowledge of speak up processes could be deterred by localised cultural factors. Knowledge alone, in other words, does not overcome cultural and relational barriers.

The implication for integrity program design is that individual training and awareness-raising should be understood as a foundation, not an end point. Building collective integrity culture requires sustained attention to the relational and organisational conditions in which individual knowledge can be meaningfully applied.

4.4. Leadership as Enabling Not Just Endorsing

Leadership commitment was a consistent success factor across all four projects, but the action research evidence introduces important nuance into what effective integrity leadership requires. Executive endorsement is necessary but not sufficient - the critical factor is whether leadership actively enables the conditions for integrity conversations to happen at every level of the organisation.

In one CoP, the leadership sponsored the project and championed it visibly. CoP members identified this as essential for securing engagement. However, the same CoP also found that hierarchical inequities presented ongoing challenges. Some researchers found it difficult as VPS-level staff to direct executive and manager-level behaviour, and in both work areas there were teams that held no integrity-related discussions despite the highest-level endorsement.

One participant in another CoP described a similar experience: reaching out to an executive to request time to speak on integrity in a team meeting and having to convince them why this was important.

These findings, reported by CoP members, suggest that visible executive sponsorship creates permission but not momentum. Momentum requires mid-level leadership actively driving the process.

A third CoP identified mid-level leadership buy-in as equally important to executive commitment, noting that managers "know their workforce" and need to be empowered to own the process.

In a fourth CoP, the focus groups found that leaders play a critical role in modelling speak up culture, that their behaviour sets the relational tone within which staff either feel safe or unsafe to raise concerns.

The picture that emerges across agencies is of integrity leadership as a distributed, relational responsibility rather than a top-down function. Executives set the tone and provide mandate; mid-level managers translate that mandate into everyday practice; and peer champions and local leaders sustain it through ongoing conversation and modelling.

4.5. Context Matters: Tailoring to Local Realities

Each project confirmed that integrity interventions must be grounded in the realities of the local context. Generic frameworks or tools often fail to resonate with staff unless adapted to the specific ethical risks, structures, and vocabulary of the organisation and specific business area. Developing a locally meaningful "integrity taxonomy" or adjusting the framing of risks to align with the staff's lived experience can greatly improve engagement.

Equally, careful attention to language was crucial. Concepts like "integrity risk" or "ethical failure" can be intimidating or abstract; using plain language, everyday examples, and positive framing (e.g., focusing on pro-integrity behaviours/green flags rather than risk mitigation) helped foster openness and constructive discussion. Integrity is relational in this sense as well as it depends on shared understanding and shared meaning, which are always context specific.

In one CoP the intervention was initially found to be cumbersome and the language did not align well with the operational setting of the team. The workshop groups adapted the intervention on the fly and found this a more workable solution for their context. The CoP reflected that balancing formal approaches with operational accessibility remains an ongoing design challenge.

A second CoP noted that building speak up culture in specific organisational environments was not evidenced in existing literature, and that assumptions drawn from the corporate workforce could not be directly applied to their context. This meant that a centralised approach needed to be mediated through leaders who understood their own local cultures. The survey confirmed this, finding that staff experiences of psychological safety varied significantly across team settings.

A third CoP noted that machinery-of-government changes had introduced staff from multiple organisational cultures, making consistent integrity messaging particularly challenging. The intervention was designed in part to address this by seeding trusted local contacts who could translate integrity messages into language and examples relevant to their specific business areas.

The lesson across agencies is that effective integrity work requires investment in understanding local integrity risk profiles, vocabulary, and cultural dynamics before designing interventions. Developing a locally meaningful integrity taxonomy or adapting existing frameworks to align with the lived experience of staff can significantly improve both engagement and impact.

4.6. Sustainability Requires Deliberate Design

Several projects raised genuine concerns about sustainability - the risk that integrity conversations and practices, once initiated, would fall off the agenda without deliberate structural support.

In one CoP members were cautiously optimistic about the impact of the project but were explicit about its limits. They noted the short duration of the project and the risk of integrity falling off the agenda as key concerns. Suggestions for sustaining the work included making integrity a standing agenda item, establishing a monthly reminder cycle, and maintaining greater visibility of the integrity team across the organisation. These are CoP member recommendations rather than tested findings, but they reflect a well-grounded understanding of the conditions under which the intervention's gains are likely to be maintained.

In a second CoP, the intervention has been established as an ongoing departmental activity - a significant sustainability achievement. However, interview data revealed that sustaining voluntary participation over time is genuinely challenging. One CoP member had observed colleagues dropping off from the project. The CoP identified that complementing formal meetings with lighter-touch digital engagement between sessions was important for maintaining connection without adding unsustainable workload.

One member in a third CoP raised a more fundamental question: whether action research is the right approach in organisational environments as dynamic as a large government agency where constant structural change makes iterative cycles difficult to sustain. This is an honest and important reflection that future projects should take seriously.

The lesson is that sustainability cannot be assumed and must be designed in from the outset. Initiatives that rely solely on voluntary goodwill or the momentum of an initial trial are unlikely to endure. Building integrity into existing structures, as standing agenda items, formal network roles, or performance and development goals, is more likely to produce lasting culture change than time-limited projects operating alongside business as usual.

4.7. Iteration, Reflection, and Learning

Finally, the projects reaffirmed the value of iterative learning. Because each intervention was grounded in action research, teams reflected continuously on what worked and what did not. This reflexive process which took shape of trying, observing, adjusting, was itself a form of integrity practice. It demonstrated humility, openness to feedback, and a willingness to learn, all of which are hallmarks of a pro-integrity culture.

In one CoP, the two workshop groups learned from each other in real time: the second group benefited directly from the first group's experience, allocating more time, managing discussion flow more carefully, and bringing a dedicated scribe. This iterative refinement produced better outcomes and modelled the kind of adaptive, learning-oriented practice that a pro-integrity culture requires.

A second CoP undertook two cycles of reflection and refinement, after the first focus group and again during collaborative data analysis, coding and recoding qualitative data to strengthen the thematic analysis. This reflexive process strengthened both the quality of the findings and the CoP's shared understanding of the integrity challenges facing different teams.

A third CoP identified specific improvements for future iterations, including more targeted interventions, executive involvement in the CoP, and dedicated time for members to monitor activity.

Future initiatives could benefit from building in more structured reflection cycles and feedback mechanisms, ensuring that learning is captured, shared, and used to refine subsequent rounds of work. Embedding reflection as a habitual practice, not just a project requirement, reinforces integrity as a living, adaptive quality within the organisation.

4.8. Summary

Across the four projects, several overarching lessons emerged about what is required to build a pro-integrity culture in the Victorian public sector. These lessons do not point to a single model or formula. Rather, they reflect a set of interconnected conditions that, taken together, create the relational and organisational foundations from which integrity culture can grow.

Integrity is relational. Integrity emerges through the ways people communicate, make sense of challenges, and support one another to act ethically, not through individual knowledge or compliance alone. Where structured spaces for dialogue were created, participants moved integrity from an abstract principle to a lived, collective responsibility. Relationality was both the means and the outcome of the work: through everyday interactions and shared reflection, participants built mutual understanding while strengthening the very relationships that make integrity possible in practice.

Systems and culture are sequential, not competing. Attention to systems and processes is not an alternative to culture change, it is its foundation. The evidence from the CoPs suggests that structured engagement with systems and processes builds the trust and shared understanding from which more challenging conversations about behaviour and culture can follow. Organisations that attempt to build integrity culture without adequate systems and processes in place are likely to find that relational goodwill cannot compensate for structural deficits.

Individual knowledge is necessary but not sufficient. Awareness-raising and training are important starting points but they are not end points. The action research consistently showed a gap between individual knowledge acquisition and the capacity to apply that knowledge in ways that produce collective culture change. Building a pro-integrity culture requires sustained attention to the relational and organisational conditions in which individual knowledge can be meaningfully enacted not just transmitted.

Leadership is enabling, not merely endorsing. Executive commitment provides mandate and signals organisational seriousness, but momentum requires mid-level and peer leadership to translate that mandate into everyday practice. The evidence from the CoPs points to integrity leadership as a distributed, relational responsibility rather than a top-down function. Executives set the tone; managers make it real; and local champions and peers sustain it through ongoing conversation and modelling. Where any of these levels were absent or disengaged, the impact of the intervention was diminished.

Context determines what works. Locally adapted approaches consistently outperformed generic frameworks. Effective integrity work requires investment in understanding local integrity risk profiles, vocabulary, and cultural dynamics before designing interventions. What resonates in one business area or organisational setting may fall flat in another, and the willingness to tailor, adapt, and respond to local realities is itself a condition of success.

Sustainability must be designed in. Several projects demonstrated that integrity conversations and practices, once initiated, risk falling off the agenda without deliberate structural support. Initiatives that rely solely on voluntary goodwill or the momentum of an initial trial are unlikely to endure. Building integrity into existing structures - as standing agenda items, formal network roles, or performance and development goals - is more likely to produce lasting culture change than time-limited projects operating alongside business as usual.

Reflection is itself integrity practice. The willingness to acknowledge what did not work, learn from it, and share that learning openly is both a method and a manifestation of pro-integrity culture. The CoPs that reflected most honestly on the limits of their interventions produced the most useful insights for future practice, demonstrating that humility, openness to feedback, and a commitment to continuous learning are not just research virtues but organisational ones.

Together these lessons point to a view of integrity culture as a collective, relational, and adaptive achievement. It cannot be mandated from above or delivered through training alone. It grows incrementally, through recurring conversations, shared sense-making, and the consistent enactment of values in everyday work. A pro-integrity culture is, in essence, built through the small, sustained practices that connect people, shape norms, and make integrity an integral part of public service.

A final observation concerns the role of the University of Sydney researchers as active participants in each CoP. The action research CoPs in this project were not general learning forums with open or self-selecting membership. They were structured inquiry communities in which the presence of academic researchers as expert critical friends was a constitutive feature of the process. The concept of the critical friend, defined by Costa and Kallick (1993, p. 50) as someone who "asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critique as a friend" is well established in the action research tradition as a mechanism for supporting the kind of rigorous, honest reflection that practitioners embedded in their own organisational contexts may find difficult to sustain alone. In this project, researchers contributed methodological expertise, supported evidence collection and analysis, and provided the critical distance needed to uncover assumptions, dynamics, and patterns that insider participants might not have noticed or felt able to name. This external perspective supported the honest examination of what was and was not working that gives action research its distinctive value over conventional staff engagement or learning forum models.

For organisations considering action research as a vehicle for integrity culture change, this suggests that the research partnership is not an optional academic add-on but an integral condition of the approach. It is what distinguishes action research CoPs from broader communities of practice as general learning forums, and what gives them the capacity to sustain reflection, generate credible evidence, and support culture change that outlasts the project itself.

APPENDIX: Checklist for using Action Research

This checklist has been developed from the experience of the four Communities of Practice that participated in this project. It is intended as a practical guide for public sector teams and integrity practitioners who are considering using action research as a method for organisational culture change, integrity reform, or other practice-based improvement initiatives.

The checklist is organised around five stages of the action research process: establishing the foundations and purpose of the project; forming and supporting Communities of Practice; defining roles and responsibilities; managing process and timeframes; and embedding learning into organisational practice. It is not intended as a rigid blueprint, as action research is by its nature iterative and context-sensitive, but rather as a starting point for teams to adapt to their own organisational circumstances and priorities.

Used alongside the case studies and key lessons in this report, the checklist offers a practical framework for translating the insights from this project into future action research initiatives across the Victorian public sector.

1) **Foundations and Purpose**
   a) Clearly define the problem or question to be explored through action research.
   b) Secure executive or senior-level sponsorship to legitimise the process and ensure organisational support.
   c) Align the project with agency priorities (e.g., integrity, culture, service delivery) to sustain engagement.
   d) Consider engaging an external researcher to facilitate the process and act as a critical friend.

2) **Establishing Communities of Practice (CoPs)**
   a) Form a cross-functional group of practitioners committed to shared learning and experimentation.
   b) Ensure each CoP has a clearly identified sponsor within the agency to provide guidance, visibility, and resourcing.
   c) Recognise participation in CoPs as legitimate work reflected in workloads, performance plans, or professional development goals.

3) **Structure and Roles**
   a) Define roles and responsibilities early:
   b) CoP members (practitioner-researchers)
   c) Agency sponsor or champion
   d) Action research resource person (academic/researcher) to support data analysis, theory linkage, and reflective practice.
   e) Clarify expectations for participation, reporting, and communication within and across CoPs.

4) **Process and Timeframes**

a) Set clear phases and timeframes for each action research cycle: problem definition, planning, action, reflection, and revision.
b) Build in regular reflection sessions to analyse outcomes and adapt actions.
c) Maintain documentation of activities, data, and reflections for transparency and learning.

5) Learning and Integration

a) Use findings to inform organisational learning and policy or practice improvements.
b) Share results across teams and agencies to support broader knowledge mobilisation.
c) Evaluate both the outcomes (what changed) and the process (what was learned about change).

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