

Foundations of integrity

Report | 10-09-2024

The Netherlands Court of Audit has audited the integrity policy as applied and experienced at Dutch ministries. It found confidential counsellors at the ministries to be in a position to perform their duties effectively. However, some ministries need a greater focus on workplace integrity, and to increase the importance attached to the applicable rules and their monitoring. A questionnaire distributed among central government civil servants found those who would report a suspected breach of integrity to be outnumbered by those who would not.

Our audit on *Foundations of integrity* was published on 10 September 2024. The extent to which ministries systematically structure their integrity policies was found to vary, and often to be incomplete. Similarly, the manner in which integrity is experienced in the workplace was found to be in need of further attention. The Minister of the Interior and Kingdom Relations' role in coordinating the central government's policy on integrity can also be improved as she currently has too little overview of how departments deal with this issue.

In addition, we assessed the extent to which the 12 core departments had incorporated their integrity policy for civil servants into their day-to-day activities. This required us to conduct an in-depth audit both of structural and cultural aspects.

Greater focus on embedding integrity

The President of the Court of Audit, Pieter Duisenberg, emphasises the importance of taking central government integrity seriously. Integrity is an essential element of good governance and the backbone of a reliable government functioning effectively. Citizens, businesses and members of parliament alike have to be able to rely on this. 'We all expect the Dutch government to operate ethically. All civil servants, including those in management roles, need to feel secure in reporting matters of professional integrity.'

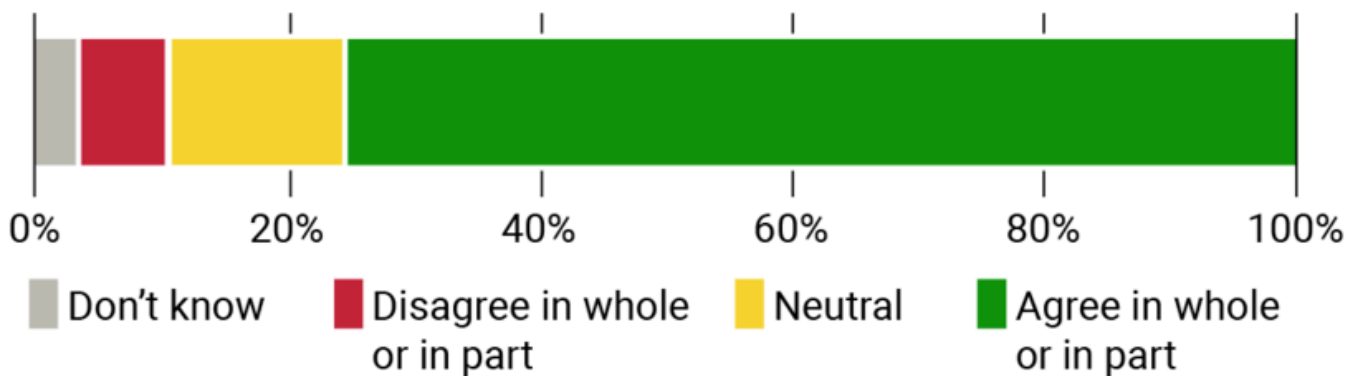
Our investigation included sending a questionnaire to thousands of ministry civil servants. This found that only 15% of those in management roles felt they received sufficient structural support, even though setting an example is vital for ensuring an ethical organisational culture. More of

those responding to the questionnaire stated that they would not report a suspected breach of integrity than the number stating that they would.

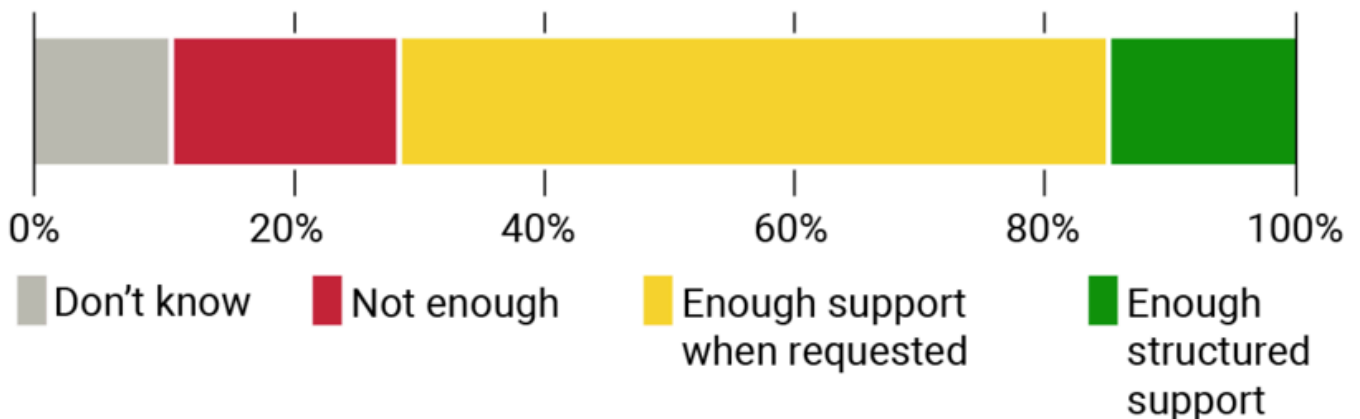
The Court of Audit previously investigated workplace integrity in, for example, 2004 and 2009. Then, too, the role played by managers in setting an example and providing support was found to be very important.

Figure 1 - Questionnaire on integrity policy sent to ministry civil servants

Staff often feel that their managers lead by example



... but managers don't feel that they receive enough structured support.



Although the central government does not apply a uniform definition of integrity, the Code of Conduct for Integrity in the Central Public Administration sets out what is expected. The government must act with integrity and this means it 'must function honestly and reliably, treating citizens correctly and with respect. The government must also set the example: if you want citizens to act respectably, you must do the same as the government.'

Integrity policy consists of numerous rules and agreements. Our audit found that while most civil servants with management responsibilities could operate effectively, they felt support to be

lacking. They believed they could set a clearer example; all ministry civil servants would then feel they would be supported if they were to raise questions or doubts about professional integrity. The subject should also be discussed more often in the workplace in order to encourage desirable behaviour. As President Duisenberg explained, ‘It’s often only when things go wrong in practice that the subject of behaving with integrity gets discussed. More can be done to ensure that professional standards, in which acting with integrity plays an integral role, are more effectively embedded.’

Incidents attract attention, but a structural approach is more effective

While the ministries have the basic structures in place for an effective policy on integrity, certain aspects of these structures need further development. In three ministries, for example, a high-quality risk analysis is needed, while such an analysis was found to be inadequate at four other ministries. Those responsible for coordinating some ministries’ approach to integrity are still too focused on dealing with incidents, whereas a structural approach is more effective. It is important, therefore, for integrity coordinators to have a strong and independent position within the organisation.

Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations’ response

The Minister of the Interior and Kingdom Relations’ response to the conclusions and recommendations is included in full in the report. While the Minister wants to reinforce the coordinating role she plays in this field, the Court of Audit regards her response as lacking in specific detail and taking too little account of the findings at various ministries. However, the announcement of a framework against which behaviour can be tested represents a step in the right direction.

Our report on *Foundations of integrity* was sent to Parliament and the Minister of the Interior and Kingdom Relations on 10 September 2024.

Do you have any feedback on this investigation?

We welcome all feedback on our audits and investigations. What do you think about our report? If you have any questions or need further information, mail us at feedback@rekenkamer.nl. We read all emails carefully and treat them in confidence.

Attachments

› [Approach to acting with integrity varies among ministries](#)

Suspected integrity breaches not always reported While confidential counsellors at ministries are in a position to perform their ...

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