



Mains Practice Question

Q. Discuss the concept of conflict of interest in public service. How should a civil servant handle situations where personal interests clash with professional duties? **(150 words)**

30 May, 2024 GS Paper 4 Theoretical Questions

Approach

- Introduce by defining conflict of interest
- Mention types of Conflict of Interest
- Suggest strategies for public servants to manage conflict of interest
- Conclude suitably.

Introduction

The concept of conflict of interest in public service is a critical issue that concerns the **integrity, impartiality, and public trust** in the civil service. A conflict of interest arises when a civil servant's personal interests, financial or otherwise, clash with their professional duties and responsibilities.

- Handling such situations requires a clear understanding of **ethical principles** and adherence to established norms and regulations.

Body

Conflict of Interest:

- **Real Conflict:** A real conflict exists when a public servant's personal interests demonstrably influence a decision they make in their official capacity.
 - **Example:** A civil servant overseeing a **tender process** has a close relative who owns a company bidding for the project.
- **Apparent Conflict:** An apparent conflict of interest exists when a reasonable person would perceive a public servant's actions as biased due to personal interests, even if no actual influence occurs.
 - It is about the **perception of impropriety**, not necessarily proof.
 - **Example:** The **Minister of Education** accepts an invitation to speak at a private university led by a close friend of their spouse, without disclosing the friendship. This raises concerns about potential favoritism in future policy decisions.

Strategies for Public Servants to Manage Conflict of Interest:

- **Identify and Disclose Potential Conflicts of Interest:** Public servants should disclose any potential conflicts of interest to their **superiors or an ethics committee**. Transparency helps maintain public trust and allows for appropriate action.
- **Recusal from Decision-making Processes:** In situations where a clear conflict of interest exists, civil servants, if possible, should **recuse themselves from participating in decision-making** processes related to the conflicting matter.
 - This step helps maintain impartiality and prevents any undue influence or perception of

bias.

- **Independent Oversight and Accountability Mechanisms:** Establishing independent oversight bodies or committees to monitor and investigate potential conflicts of interest can enhance public trust and accountability.
 - These mechanisms should have the authority to impose appropriate sanctions or disciplinary actions in cases of non-compliance or unethical conduct.
- **Randomized Assignment of Tasks:** Implementing systems for randomly assigning civil servants to specific tasks, projects, or decision-making processes, reducing the potential for intentional conflicts of interest or favoritism.
 - This approach can be particularly useful in areas such as **contract awarding, licensing, or regulatory oversight.**
- **Conflict Sensitivity Training:** Incorporate regular conflict sensitivity training into public service development programs. This training can help officials identify potential conflicts, understand the risks, and develop strategies for mitigation.

Conclusion

By adhering to ethical principles and taking proactive measures to **identify, disclose, and manage conflicts of interest**, civil servants can maintain public trust, upholding **good governance** standards, and ensure that their professional duties are carried out in an impartial and objective manner, **prioritizing the greater good of the citizens they serve.**

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