

The Cronyism Risk Leadership Appointments and Merit Based Selection in Australia

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Abstract: Leadership appointments create governance risks when personal connections displace evidence of capability. This article distinguishes legitimate professional networking from cronyism and nepotism, and argues that the central concern is whether appointment decisions rest on transparent, job-related and independently reviewable criteria. It draws together organisational research, Australian Public Service merit principles, corporate governance guidance, prudential standards and public inquiry findings. The analysis identifies four potential mechanisms through which relationship-dominated selection can weaken organisational integrity: reduced procedural fairness and trust, inhibited employee voice, a mismatch between leadership capability and organisational responsibilities, and the reproduction of socially homogeneous decision-making networks. Public inquiries illustrate the consequences of deficient governance, but do not establish cronyism merely because institutional failure occurred. Nor do available national cost estimates measure losses attributable to cronyism. The article proposes a practical framework combining predefined capability requirements, structured assessment, conflict management, independent participation, comparative reasons and review after appointment. It concludes that the legitimacy of an appointment depends on evidence of suitability rather than the absence of any prior relationship.

Keywords: cronyism; nepotism; leadership selection; merit; organisational justice; psychological safety; corporate governance; public sector; Australia.

I. Introduction

Leadership selection is a governance decision with consequences beyond recruitment. Senior appointees allocate resources, shape risk appetite, model acceptable conduct and influence which information reaches decision-makers. An appointment process that gives insufficient weight to capability can therefore expose an organisation to risks that extend beyond the performance of one individual.

Professional networks can provide useful information about candidates. Referrals, previous working relationships and sector experience may help identify capable people. The concern arises when confidence grounded in a relationship substitutes for evidence of suitability, when conflicts remain unmanaged, or when selection criteria are designed around a preferred candidate. For the purposes of this article, cronyism means preferential appointment or advancement grounded substantially in personal or political connection at the expense of defensible merit. Nepotism describes the corresponding preference for relatives. These are analytical definitions rather than assertions that every such appointment breaches a particular law.

The distinction matters because accusations of cronyism can outrun the evidence. A candidate known to a decision-maker may be the strongest applicant. An unsuitable appointment may occur without any personal connection, and an organisation may fail despite appointing competent leaders. The relevant questions concern the role's requirements, the evidence used to compare candidates, the management of conflicts and the reasons for the final decision.

This article offers an interdisciplinary governance analysis combining selected organisational research with Australian legislation, regulatory materials and inquiry reports. It does not estimate the prevalence of cronyism or present a systematic review of all selection research. Its argument concerns the risks and safeguards associated with relationship-dominated appointments, with the regulatory discussion current to 1 October 2026. Research on selection, justice, voice and safety informs that argument; it does not by itself prove that cronyism caused a particular organisational failure.

Gallup's published account of its 2015 management research links managerial talent with organisational outcomes and encourages selection based on the talents required by the role. Its findings draw on international research and concern managerial capability. They cannot be converted into a percentage of Australian organisations practising cronyism.¹

II. Networks and Selection Risk

Homophily, the tendency for social relationships to form among people with similar characteristics, is well established in network research. McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Cook describe how similarity structures relationships and the information people receive.² Applied to leadership selection, this suggests a mechanism through which a narrow network can restrict who becomes visible, receives sponsorship or gains access to an opportunity. The further risk is that familiarity becomes an untested proxy for competence. That application is a governance inference rather than an estimate of Australian appointment practices.

Selection research provides a basis for testing candidates beyond informal impressions. Schmidt and Hunter's influential review compared the predictive validity of selection methods, while Roth, Bobko and McFarland examined work sample tests and revised earlier estimates of their validity.³ These studies support attention to the evidence behind an assessment method, rather than reliance on its reputation or intuitive appeal.

Later research also requires caution about older validity estimates. Sackett and colleagues found that commonly used corrections for restriction of range had substantially overstated the predictive validity of many selection procedures. Structured interviews remained highly ranked in their revised analysis.⁴ The practical implication is to use consistent, job-related assessment while recognising its limits. No method guarantees a successful appointment, and a single validity coefficient should not be treated as applicable to every Australian leadership role.

The language of cultural fit requires comparable discipline. Rivera's study of hiring in elite professional service firms found that evaluators considered shared leisure pursuits, experiences and styles alongside competence.⁵ The study identifies a mechanism of cultural matching in its particular setting; it does not establish its prevalence across Australian workplaces. Nevertheless, it gives organisations a reason to distinguish evidence of ethical and behavioural alignment from social similarity. A candidate's capacity to meet organisational obligations should be assessed through relevant conduct, rather than an impression that the person would fit comfortably into the existing leadership group.

¹ Amy Adkins, 'Report: What Separates Great Managers From the Rest', *Gallup* (Web Page, 12 May 2015) <<https://www.gallup.com/workplace/236594/report-separates-great-managers-rest.aspx>>.

² Miller McPherson, Lynn Smith-Lovin and James M Cook, 'Birds of a Feather: Homophily in Social Networks' (2001) 27 *Annual Review of Sociology* 415.

³ Frank L Schmidt and John E Hunter, 'The Validity and Utility of Selection Methods in Personnel Psychology: Practical and Theoretical Implications of 85 Years of Research Findings' (1998) 124(2) *Psychological Bulletin* 262; Philip L Roth, Philip Bobko and Lynn A McFarland, 'A Meta-Analysis of Work Sample Test Validity: Updating and Integrating Some Classic Literature' (2005) 58(4) *Personnel Psychology* 1009.

⁴ Paul R Sackett et al, 'Revisiting Meta-Analytic Estimates of Validity in Personnel Selection: Addressing Systematic Overcorrection for Restriction of Range' (2022) 107(11) *Journal of Applied Psychology* 2040.

⁵ Lauren A Rivera, 'Hiring as Cultural Matching: The Case of Elite Professional Service Firms' (2012) 77(6) *American Sociological Review* 999.

III. Merit and Procedural Justice

Appointment decisions communicate how an organisation distributes opportunity and authority. Gilliland's model applies organisational justice to applicants' reactions to selection procedures and outcomes. Cropanzano, Bowen and Gilliland's review connects fair treatment with organisational outcomes including trust and commitment.⁶ These sources distinguish procedural fairness from satisfaction with the result: an unsuccessful candidate may still regard a process as fair. They do not establish that every opaque appointment produces the same effect on employees.

For governance purposes, this distinction makes the process valuable independently of the appointee's eventual performance. An organisation should be able to explain how it assessed the work, compared candidates and reached its decision. Where the explanation depends primarily on an influential sponsor's confidence, employees may infer that access to power matters more than demonstrated ability. The extent of any resulting loss of trust remains a question for evidence in the organisation concerned.

The Australian Public Service provides an explicit statutory expression of merit. Section 10A(1)(c) of the *Public Service Act 1999* (Cth) requires engagement and promotion decisions based on merit, while s 10A(1)(f) addresses workplaces free from discrimination, patronage and favouritism. Section 10A(2) defines merit through reasonable opportunity to apply, competitive comparative assessment, work-related qualities genuinely required for the duties, capacity to achieve relevant outcomes and the primacy of that assessment in the decision.⁷

The Australian Public Service Commission's April 2026 guide explains these requirements and the importance of fair, documented selection. It also recognises that unconscious bias and structural inequities can undermine fairness, so a nominally merit-based process requires scrutiny of what a role actually needs.⁸ These principles govern APS employment within the applicable legislative framework. They should not be presented as a universal legal rule for every private workplace, ministerial appointment or state public service. Their wider relevance is as a model for making comparative suitability open to explanation.

IV. Leadership and Employee Voice

Leadership influences whether people raise concerns, admit mistakes or challenge assumptions. Edmondson's work on psychological safety describes the importance of an environment in which people can take these interpersonal risks. Detert and Burris found that managerial openness was associated with employee voice in a study of employees and managers in a restaurant chain.⁹ This research supports attention to how leaders respond to challenge. It does not directly test whether relationship-based appointments suppress voice.

A plausible concern is that employees who perceive a leader as protected by personal connections may doubt that a challenge will receive impartial consideration. If those concerns inhibit reporting, decision-makers may lose information about emerging risks. This is a mechanism to investigate, not a conclusion that every leader appointed through a professional network discourages dissent. Organisations can test it through confidential feedback, escalation records and evidence about responses to concerns.

In safety-critical and technically complex environments, the quality of that information is particularly consequential. Christian and colleagues' meta-analysis links safety climate with safety behaviours and outcomes. Clarke and Ward

⁶ Stephen W Gilliland, 'The Perceived Fairness of Selection Systems: An Organizational Justice Perspective' (1993) 18(4) *Academy of Management Review* 694; Russell Cropanzano, David E Bowen and Stephen W Gilliland, 'The Management of Organizational Justice' (2007) 21(4) *Academy of Management Perspectives* 34, 34–5.

⁷ *Public Service Act 1999* (Cth) ss 10A(1)(c), (f), (2).

⁸ Australian Public Service Commission, *Guide on Merit in the Australian Public Service* (Guide, April 2026) 5–7.

⁹ Amy C Edmondson, *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth* (John Wiley & Sons, 2018); James R Detert and Ethan R Burris, 'Leadership Behavior and Employee Voice: Is the Door Really Open?' (2007) 50(4) *Academy of Management Journal* 869.

examine relationships between leadership influence tactics and safety participation, while Parker, Axtell and Turner associate communication quality, job autonomy and supportive supervision with safer working.¹⁰ Together, these studies support the significance of leadership behaviour and workplace conditions. They do not establish that a fixed proportion of Australian injuries results from cronyism, or that familiarity in an appointment caused a particular safety incident.

Lessons from Australian Public Inquiries

Public inquiries demonstrate the consequences of deficient governance, but their findings need to be connected carefully to the appointment question. Evidence of weak oversight, distorted incentives or poor project decisions is not sufficient on its own to prove that leaders were chosen because of personal relationships. A conclusion about cronyism requires separate evidence concerning the selection process and the influence of those relationships.

Banking Royal Commission

The Royal Commission into Misconduct in the Banking, Superannuation and Financial Services Industry identified connections between misconduct and financial reward, conflicts between duty and interest, and shortcomings in accountability. It also examined boards' failures to obtain adequate information and challenge management about non-financial risks.¹¹ These findings support the importance of governance and scrutiny. They do not, without evidence about appointment decisions, establish that major-bank leaders were generally selected through an old boys' network. The implication for selection is that relevant capability and willingness to challenge should be assessed explicitly.

Aged Care Royal Commission

The Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety documented serious deficiencies in care and proposed substantial governance reform. Recommendation 88 included stronger independence in provider governing bodies and a fit and proper person test for key personnel.¹² These were recommendations in the 2021 report, rather than a description of every current legal requirement. They illustrate the importance of oversight and suitability in services for vulnerable people. They do not establish a general finding that chief executives were appointed through jobs for mates arrangements.

Queensland Health Payroll

The 2013 Queensland Health Payroll System Commission of Inquiry examined the procurement, delivery and management of a complex payroll implementation. Its report provides evidence of serious shortcomings in decision-making, project management and governance.¹³ Those findings help explain why an organisation needs leaders and advisers able to interrogate technical proposals, define responsibilities and respond to warning signs. A separate claim that project leaders were appointed because of political connections would require evidence about those appointments, rather than an inference drawn simply from the project's failure.

Costs and Causal Attribution

An unsuitable senior appointment can create recruitment and separation expenses, delay decisions, disrupt delivery and reduce institutional knowledge. Where leadership also contributes to weak compliance, unsafe practices or staff

¹⁰ Michael S Christian et al, 'Workplace Safety: A Meta-Analysis of the Roles of Person and Situation Factors' (2009) 94(5) *Journal of Applied Psychology* 1103; Sharon Clarke and Katie Ward, 'The Role of Leader Influence Tactics and Safety Climate in Engaging Employees' Safety Participation' (2006) 26(5) *Risk Analysis* 1175; Sharon K Parker, Carolyn M Axtell and Nick Turner, 'Designing a Safer Workplace: Importance of Job Autonomy, Communication Quality, and Supportive Supervisors' (2001) 6(3) *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* 211.

¹¹ Royal Commission into Misconduct in the Banking, Superannuation and Financial Services Industry, *Final Report* (Final Report, 1 February 2019) vol 1, 1–4, 395–6.

¹² Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety, *Care, Dignity and Respect* (Final Report, 26 February 2021) vol 1, 265–6 (recommendation 88).

¹³ Queensland Health Payroll System Commission of Inquiry, *Report* (Report, 31 July 2013) 213–16.

departures, further costs may follow. These are possible cost pathways. Their existence does not establish how much loss a particular appointment caused, or whether personal connections influenced that appointment.

Safe Work Australia's *Annual Report 2016–17* records an estimated total economic cost of work-related injury and disease of \$61.8 billion for the 2012–13 reference year.¹⁴ This is a historical estimate of a broad economic burden. It is not a current annual figure or a measure of losses attributable to cronyism, deficient leadership or network-based appointments. Converting it into such a measure would require evidence identifying the contribution of those factors.

A defensible organisational estimate would begin with actual recruitment, remuneration, separation, turnover, incident and operational data. It would explain the counterfactual: what costs were likely to occur under a suitable appointment? It would also address other contributing factors and the possibility of counting the same loss more than once. Without that analysis, generic turnover multipliers and national injury estimates cannot sustain a precise Australian dollar figure for cronyism.

V. A Framework for Defensible Appointments

The practical response is to ensure that familiarity does not decide the outcome. The following framework synthesises the preceding research and governance principles into proposed safeguards. The recommendations should be adapted to the role's responsibilities, the organisation's size and its legal obligations.

Define the Capability Required

Establish the role's requirements before shortlisting candidates. Identify the technical knowledge, leadership behaviours, risk responsibilities and ethical judgement genuinely needed to perform the work. Criteria should explain the outcomes the appointee must achieve. Changes during the process should be justified and documented, reducing the opportunity to tailor requirements around a preferred person.

Identify Collective Skills and Gaps

For boards and leadership teams, assess the capabilities already present and the gaps the appointment should fill. ASX Recommendation 2.2 addresses disclosure of a board skills matrix, with commentary on defining skills and the criteria for recognising them.¹⁵ A useful matrix goes beyond a list of labels: it specifies the evidence needed to demonstrate each relevant capability. Extending that practice to senior executive appointments is a governance recommendation, rather than a claim that every such appointment is subject to Recommendation 2.2.

Structure the Assessment

Use materially consistent behavioural questions and scoring criteria tied to the role. Where suitable, work samples or simulations can test relevant judgement and capability. Panel members should record their assessments before collective discussion, so that a confident sponsor's view can be compared with other evidence. Structured assessment creates a clearer basis for comparison; its effectiveness still depends on the relevance of the questions, the quality of the evidence and fair implementation.¹⁶

Manage Conflicts and Protect Independence

Require decision-makers to disclose relationships and interests that could affect, or reasonably appear to affect, their judgement. Record how each conflict is managed. A previous relationship need not automatically exclude a panel member, but recusal or an independent assessor may be appropriate when the relationship could compromise the decision. Panel composition should include sufficient relevant expertise and independence to test the preferred candidate's evidence. An external member is useful only if that person can exercise independent judgement in practice.

¹⁴ Safe Work Australia, *Annual Report 2016–17* (Annual Report, 5 October 2017) 56.

¹⁵ ASX Corporate Governance Council, *Corporate Governance Principles and Recommendations* (4th ed, February 2019) 13 (recommendation 2.2 and commentary).

¹⁶ Sackett et al (n 4); Roth, Bobko and McFarland (n 3).

Assess Values through Conduct

Replace vague judgements about fit with evidence of behaviour. Ask how candidates have handled ethical conflicts, challenged unsafe decisions, responded to dissent and accepted accountability. Test explanations against relevant examples and references. This assesses alignment with organisational obligations while reducing reliance on shared interests or social ease.¹⁷

Record Reasons and Review Outcomes

The decision record should explain how the preferred candidate met the criteria and what distinguished that candidate from credible alternatives. It should preserve material evidence, scoring and conflict-management decisions, subject to appropriate privacy controls. After appointment, review performance against defined responsibilities, risk indicators, conduct and team feedback. Such review can identify gaps in the process, although a later outcome cannot by itself prove that the initial decision was fair or unfair.

Australian Regulatory and Governance Context

Australia's appointment and accountability frameworks vary by sector. APS merit requirements address the integrity of engagement and promotion decisions. Listed entities operate under ASX's governance disclosure framework, including its if not why not approach: a recommendation can be departed from, with an explanation of the reasons. The distinction between a recommendation and a disclosure obligation matters when describing board selection requirements.¹⁸

As at 1 October 2026, the fourth edition of the ASX principles remains in effect. ASX released a new draft fifth edition for consultation on 21 July 2026. Its proposals should be identified as proposed changes, rather than incorporated into an account of current requirements.¹⁹

APRA's CPS 520 applies to specified institutions in banking, general insurance, life insurance and private health insurance. It requires a fit and proper policy and assessment of responsible persons, generally before appointment and annually thereafter. Suitability encompasses competence, integrity and the management of relevant conflicts.²⁰ This addresses minimum suitability for designated responsibilities. It does not impose the same comparative merit process as APS recruitment, and CPS 520 should not be described as the fit and proper standard for every APRA-regulated sector.

The Financial Accountability Regime replaced the Banking Executive Accountability Regime. It commenced for banking entities on 15 March 2024 and for insurance and superannuation entities on 15 March 2025. The *Financial Accountability Regime Act 2023* (Cth) establishes obligations for accountable entities and persons, including responsibilities relating to conduct, key personnel and notification.²¹ Its relevance here is the identification and oversight of senior responsibility. It does not create a general prohibition on cronyism or require all Australian employers to adopt a common recruitment system.

These frameworks perform distinct functions. Comparative merit concerns who is best suited to a role; fit and proper assessment addresses specified suitability requirements; accountability arrangements identify responsibilities and

¹⁷ Rivera (n 5).

¹⁸ ASX Corporate Governance Council (n 15) 2–3.

¹⁹ ASX, 'ASX Corporate Governance Council' (Web Page) <<https://www.asx.com.au/about/regulation/corporate-governance-principles-and-recommendations/asx-corporate-governance-council>>; ASX, 'Corporate Governance Principles and Recommendations' (Web Page) <<https://www.asx.com.au/about/regulation/corporate-governance-principles-and-recommendations>>. Both accessed 1 October 2026.

²⁰ Australian Prudential Regulation Authority, *Prudential Standard CPS 520 Fit and Proper* (Prudential Standard, 1 July 2019) <<https://www.apra.gov.au/standards/cps-520>>.

²¹ *Financial Accountability Regime Act 2023* (Cth) ss 3, 20–23, 31–34; Australian Securities and Investments Commission, 'Financial Accountability Regime' (Web Page) <<https://www.asic.gov.au/regulatory-resources/financial-services/financial-accountability-regime>>.

consequences. They can inform complementary controls, but compliance with one does not demonstrate compliance with the others. A defensible appointment process should explain both the applicable obligations and the organisation's own grounds for selecting the candidate.

VI. Reform and Implementation

Reform should strengthen the integrity of decisions while preserving legitimate referrals, internal succession and professional mobility. Public and regulated bodies could require written capability criteria and conflict declarations for designated senior appointments. Boards could require independent participation in selecting leaders of risk, compliance, audit, safety and people functions. The value of these measures would lie in the evidence and scrutiny they produce, rather than completion of a form alone.

Organisations could disclose how they assess board and senior leadership capability without publishing confidential candidate information. Internal audit or governance committees could periodically examine whether appointment records demonstrate real comparison, whether conflicts were managed and whether criteria changed to favour an individual. Findings should inform improvements to the process rather than substitute retrospective approval for an inadequate initial assessment.

Grievance and reporting channels should also provide a route for concerns about manipulated recruitment, concealed conflicts or retaliation. Concerns require impartial assessment and safeguards for the people involved. Organisations should distinguish the availability of an internal reporting channel from statutory whistleblower protection, which depends on the applicable law and circumstances. Clear routes for review can make selection integrity a continuing governance responsibility.

VII. Limits of the Evidence

Much of the research discussed here comes from international studies or particular occupational settings. It can inform Australian governance, but its findings cannot establish national prevalence simply by changing the geographic label. The studies examine different subjects, including selection validity, fairness, employee voice and safety. The links drawn between them and cronyism are an analytical synthesis that requires further testing.

Institutional failures are also multicausal. A weak selection process may contribute to unsuitable leadership, but incentives, resources, systems and regulatory settings can affect outcomes independently. Informal sponsorship and influence are difficult to measure because they may leave little trace in formal recruitment records. These limits support careful investigation of particular processes and decisions. They do not support a fixed national proportion of leaders appointed through cronyism or a precise aggregate loss attributed to it.

VIII. Conclusion

An appointment becomes difficult to defend when personal confidence replaces evidence of suitability. A fair process should make the role's requirements clear, compare relevant evidence, manage conflicts and preserve reasons that can withstand scrutiny. That discipline also creates a basis for examining whether the appointment strengthened the organisation's capacity to perform its responsibilities.

Australian governance frameworks already recognise merit, capability, suitability and accountability in different settings. Those principles support stronger appointment practices without requiring a blanket prohibition on candidates known to decision-makers. The decisive question is whether contemporaneous evidence explains why the person was selected and how that decision served the work the organisation needed done.

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