

# Aboriginal Cultural Capability Toolkit

# Table of Contents

Aboriginal Cultural Capability Toolkit .....	1
Introduction .....	3
<i>Policy frameworks that support this toolkit</i> .....	4
<i>Useful links and other information</i> .....	6
Aboriginal Self-determination .....	7
<i>Useful links and other information</i> .....	9
Aboriginal Culture and History .....	10
<i>Aboriginal History</i> .....	10
<i>Aboriginal Culture</i> .....	11
<i>Useful links and other information</i> .....	18
Aboriginal Victoria Today .....	19
<i>Victorian Aboriginal Demographics</i> .....	19
<i>Victorian Aboriginal Languages</i> .....	19
<i>Questions for managers and workplaces:</i> .....	22
<i>Useful links and other information</i> .....	23
Aboriginal Protocols .....	24
<i>Questions for managers and workplaces in following cultural protocols:</i> .....	27
<i>Useful links and other information</i> .....	28
Aboriginal Cultural Capability .....	29
<i>Useful links and other information</i> .....	32
Recruiting and Inducting Aboriginal Staff .....	33
<i>Questions for managers and workplaces when recruiting and inducting Aboriginal staff:</i> .....	39
<i>Useful links and other information</i> .....	39
Supporting Aboriginal Staff .....	40
<i>Questions for managers and workplaces in supporting Aboriginal staff:</i> .....	45
<i>Useful links and other information</i> .....	46
Career Development for Aboriginal Staff .....	47
<i>Questions for managers and workplaces in supporting career development of Aboriginal staff:</i> .....	48
<i>Useful links and other information</i> .....	48
Glossary of Terms .....	49
<i>Useful links and other information</i> .....	51



# Introduction



The Barring Djinang Aboriginal Cultural Capability toolkit supports public sector workplaces to build their capability to attract, recruit, retain, support and develop Aboriginal staff at all levels. Its aim is to strengthen the cultural capability of managers and staff, as well as the cultural safety of public sector workplaces for Aboriginal employees.

Recruitment and retention of Aboriginal employees at all levels across the Victorian public sector will lead to improved policies and programs, designed to better reflect the needs and aspirations of communities and delivered through more appropriate models and processes.

The name Barring Djinang is from the Taungurung language and means ‘path of the feet’ and was chosen as a reminder of the many different career paths that the Victorian public sector can provide to Aboriginal people.

## **Barring Djinang Five Year Aboriginal Employment Strategy**

This toolkit is one of the fifteen initiatives that form the Victorian Government’s Barring Djinang Aboriginal Employment Strategy for the Victorian public sector 2017-2022. The toolkit supports Barring Djinang’s strategic aim to enhance the career options and experiences of Aboriginal staff across the Victorian public sector. Building the cultural capability of the public sector at individual, managerial, leadership and whole-of-organisation levels will help to ensure that the Victorian public sector can work more effectively with the community it serves, including supporting Aboriginal self-determination and ensuring that the priorities of Aboriginal Victorians shape the work of government.<sup>1</sup>

Barring Djinang has adopted a target that by 2022, employment of Aboriginal people in the Victorian public sector will increase from 0.9 per cent in 2016 to 2 per cent of total employees.<sup>2</sup> The strategy also aims to support Aboriginal Victorians to be represented at the highest levels of public sector leadership.



## How to use this toolkit

The toolkit provides information on how to build the cultural capability of public sector workplaces. It discusses key concepts and understandings of Aboriginal culture and cultural capability. Each section contains topic information, questions which workplaces can use to reflect on their cultural capability and useful links for further information.

Throughout this toolkit, the term Aboriginal is used to refer to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

## How we wrote this toolkit

This toolkit was developed with the valuable support of the Victorian Aboriginal Childcare Agency (VACCA). We acknowledge the cultural expertise provided by VACCA to this project.

## Policy frameworks that support this toolkit

### Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework (VAAF) 2018-2023

The VAAF provides an ambitious and forward-looking agenda for Aboriginal affairs with the vision that 'All Aboriginal Victorian people, families and communities are healthy, safe, resilient, thriving and living culturally rich lives'.

The VAAF has two key purposes:

1. It is the Victorian Government's overarching framework for working with Aboriginal Victorians, organisations and the wider community to drive action and improve outcomes
2. It sets the whole-of-government self-determination enablers and principles, and commits government to significant structural and systemic transformation.

Improving the cultural capability of the government is an important step leading to improved outcomes for Aboriginal Victorians. The VAAF's action logic acknowledges that, to do this, government must embed self-determining approaches across government and transform its current structures and systems through action to:

⇒ prioritise culture



address racism and promote cultural safety  
address trauma and support healing  
transfer power and resources to community.

The application of these enablers of self-determination will help to address structural and systemic barriers experienced by Aboriginal Victorians.

Government is taking responsibility for this first step, acknowledging that an internal transformation is required to create a context in which Aboriginal Victorians, including Aboriginal public servants, are empowered to own and drive safe, relevant and accessible responses to meet community needs, that in turn will lead to improved outcomes for Aboriginal Victorians.

## **Victorian Aboriginal Economic Strategy 2013-2020**

The Victorian Aboriginal Economic Strategy 2013-2020 complements commitments made in the VAAF and identifies building Aboriginal public sector employment and career development opportunities in the public sector as key element to improving Aboriginal economic participation and development and a vital foundation for Aboriginal self-determination. Aboriginal economic development is also vital to growing Victoria's wealth generally and to increasing overall economic productivity and competitive advantage.

## **Victorian Aboriginal Inclusion Framework 2011**

Aboriginal people, families and communities continue to experience social exclusion. This means being less able to contribute to and benefit from participation in the workforce and other aspects of social, economic community life.<sup>3</sup> Social inclusion on the other hand means having opportunities to participate fully in society through employment, access to education, health and community services and being heard.<sup>4</sup>

## **Closing the Gap**

In 2011, the Victorian Government recommitted to Closing the Gap in outcomes between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. As part of this, all Victorian Government departments were required to prepare Aboriginal inclusion action plans. These included strategies to increase employment of Aboriginal people.<sup>5</sup>



## Useful links and other information

(1) [Barring Djinang website](#) details the full range of Barring Djinang initiatives.

(2) [Barring Djinang, VPSC and AEU launch brochure](#).

(3, 4) [Social exclusion and inclusion: Resources for child and family services](#).

(5) [DPC's Aboriginal Employment Action Plan](#).

[The Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework 2018-2023](#).

[The Victorian Aboriginal Economic Strategy 2013-2020](#).



# Aboriginal Self-determination

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## What is Aboriginal Self-determination?

Self-determination is an 'ongoing process of choice' to ensure that Indigenous communities are able to meet their social, cultural and economic needs. It is not about creating a separate Indigenous 'state'.

The right to self-determination is based on the simple acknowledgment that Indigenous peoples are Australia's first people, as was recognised by law in the historic Mabo judgement.

The loss of this right to live according to a set of common values and beliefs, and to have that right respected by others, is at the heart of the current disadvantage experienced by Indigenous Australians.

Without self-determination it is not possible for Indigenous Australians to fully overcome the legacy of colonisation and dispossession.

Self-determination was prescribed by the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1987-1991) as being necessary for Aboriginal people to overcome their previous and continuing institutionalised disadvantage and disempowerment. In 1997, the Bringing Them Home report recommended the implementation of self-determination in relation to the wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people through the passage of national framework and standards legislation. <sup>1</sup>

## Aboriginal self-determination in policy

Self-determination is a Victorian Government policy commitment enshrined in legislation. Section 12 of the Victorian Children, Youth and Families Act 2005, for example, recognises the principle of Aboriginal self-management and self-determination as a key principle when determining decisions that concern Aboriginal children and families.

The Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006 recognises that Aboriginal people hold distinct cultural rights, including the right to:

- ⇒ enjoy their identity and culture
- ⇒ maintain and use their language

- 
- ⇒ maintain their kinship ties
  - ⇒ maintain their distinctive spiritual, material and economic relationship with the land and waters and other resources with which they have a connection under traditional laws and customs.<sup>2</sup>

In June 2018, the Victorian parliament passed the Advancing the Treaty Process with Aboriginal Victorians Act 2018 which is Australia's first ever treaty law that will create a framework for negotiating a treaty with Aboriginal people.

Over 7,000 Aboriginal Victorians (including Traditional Owners, clans and family groups) have engaged in the treaty process to date.

The Act sets out the process that will lead to treaty negotiations.

## Self-determination in practice

In many contexts including natural resource management, economic development, health care, justice, education and care and protection for children, self-determination mean the transfer of power, control, decision and making and resources from government and the non-Aboriginal service sector to Aboriginal communities and their organisations. The realisation of self-determination in Victoria's child and family services sector, for example, means moving from a position where Aboriginal people have no control and limited influence, to one where Aboriginal people have full control of decision making regarding Aboriginal children and families.

Aboriginal employment in the Victorian public sector can support self-determination in practice by:

- ⇒ Strengthening Aboriginal employment in senior positions, which supports the development of future Aboriginal leaders for the public sector and for Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations.
- ⇒ Ensuring that Aboriginal peoples' rights to culture are respected and upheld.
- ⇒ Having a clear commitment to self-determination.
- ⇒ Adopting a strong commitment to cultural safety which is reflected in the physical environment.
- ⇒ Involving Aboriginal people in decision making.
- ⇒ Ensuring that Aboriginal people have a voice regarding Aboriginal business.
- ⇒ Consulting or partnering with Aboriginal people when designing services and programs for Aboriginal people.



## Questions to assist you to ask yourself as a manager:

- ➔ Do you understand the intent of Victoria's self-determination in policy?
- ➔ Are you and your staff supporting Aboriginal self-determination in practice?



## Useful links and other information

A video of Yorta Yorta man and artist Tirirki Onus speaking about the importance of self-determination

[The Victorian Government's self-determination policy](#)

[Information about Victorian Treaty legislation](#)

(1) [Social justice and human rights for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, Australian Human Rights Commission, 2003](#)

(2) [Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006, Section 19](#)



# Aboriginal Culture and History

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## Aboriginal History

Aboriginal people have a shared history of colonisation and forced removal of their children. To be culturally competent, we must acknowledge and tell the truth about Australian history and its ongoing impact for Aboriginal people, and we should understand how the past continues to shape lives today.

Before colonisation Aboriginal people lived in small family groups linked into larger language groups with distinct territorial boundaries. These groups had complex kinship systems and rules for social interaction; they had roles relating to law, education, spiritual development and resource management; they had language, ceremonies, customs and traditions and extensive knowledge of their environment. In other words, Aboriginal cultures were strong and well developed, Aboriginal communities were self-determining, and Aboriginal children were nurtured and protected.

European colonisation had a devastating impact on Aboriginal communities and cultures. Aboriginal people were subjected to a range of injustices, including mass killings or being displaced from their traditional lands and relocated on missions and reserves in the name of protection. Cultural practices were denied, and subsequently many were lost. For Aboriginal people, colonisation meant massacre, violence, disease and loss.

Despite the past and present impacts of colonisation, Aboriginal kinship systems, customs and traditions still thrive, and Aboriginal people, families and communities remain strong and resilient. <sup>1</sup>

There is a rich body of literature on the violent history of colonisation in Victoria including massacres, missions, segregation, deaths in custody and land rights.

Some sources you can access for information are:

⇒ [Deadly Story - History](#)

⇒ [AIATSIS Timeline](#)



## Stolen Generations

'The Stolen Generations are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who, when they were children, were taken away from their families and communities as the result of past government policies. Children were removed by governments, churches and welfare bodies to be brought up in institutions, fostered out or adopted by white families.

The removal of Aboriginal children took place from the early days of British colonisation in Australia. It broke important cultural, spiritual and family ties and has left a lasting and inter-generational impact on the lives and well-being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people<sup>2</sup> \_

## The National Apology to The Stolen Generations

On the 13th of February 2008 the Prime Minister of Australia, Kevin Rudd delivered an apology to the Stolen Generations. The National Apology to the Stolen Generations came about as a recommendation from The National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal Children from their Families. It highlighted the suffering of Indigenous families under the Commonwealth, state and territory Aboriginal protection and welfare laws and policies.

The National Inquiry then led to the Bringing Them Home report which was tabled in Parliament on 26 May 1997. It contained 54 Recommendations on how to redress the wrongs done to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples by the race-based laws and policies of successive governments throughout Australia.

Recommendations 5a and 5b suggested that all Australian Parliaments and State and Territory police forces acknowledge responsibility for past laws, policies and practices of forcible removal and that on behalf of their predecessors officially apologise to Indigenous individuals, families and communities.<sup>3</sup> \_

[Watch the National Apology to The Stolen Generations](#)

## Aboriginal Culture

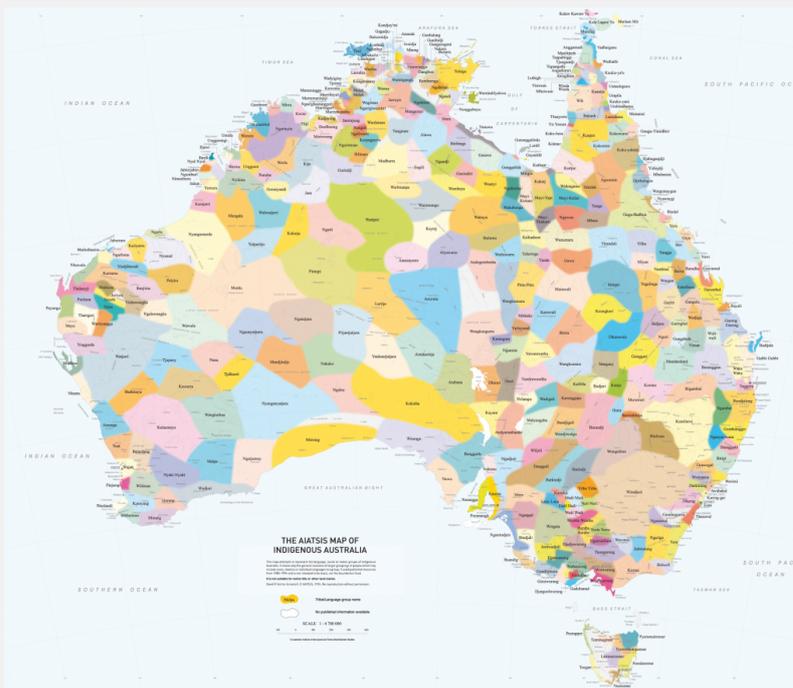
There are many Aboriginal cultures and peoples. Aboriginal cultures exist and thrive in a wide range of communities throughout Australia. The Aboriginal people you work with are not all the same—their culture, what they value and hold dear, how they live and make decisions and their relationships are diverse. As in Western and Eastern cultures, Aboriginal cultures have characteristics they share and others that differentiate them, so

it is important to avoid assumptions regarding Aboriginal cultures.

While diversity exists across and within Aboriginal communities, some Aboriginal cultural characteristics are part of all Aboriginal cultures and unite Aboriginal people through shared history and shared experiences. Understanding these cultural characteristics and appreciating their impact for Aboriginal people today is a cornerstone of cultural competence.<sup>4</sup>

‘For thousands of years, the original inhabitants of Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people occupied the lands with very different boundaries than today, centred on intimate cultural relationships with the land and sea.

This map is an attempt to represent all the language, tribal or nation groups of the Indigenous peoples of Australia. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups were included on the map based on published resources available between 1988 and 1994 which determine the cultural, language and trade boundaries and relationships between groups’<sup>5</sup>



[Explore the map in further detail.](#)

## Aboriginal Cultural Connections

For Aboriginal people, culture is the foundation upon which everything else is built.

Culture underpins all aspects of life including connections to family and community, connection to Country, the expression of values, symbols, cultural practices and traditional and contemporary forms of cultural expression such as Aboriginal language, ceremonies, cultural events, storytelling, dance, music and art. The following diagram highlights these important cultural connections:



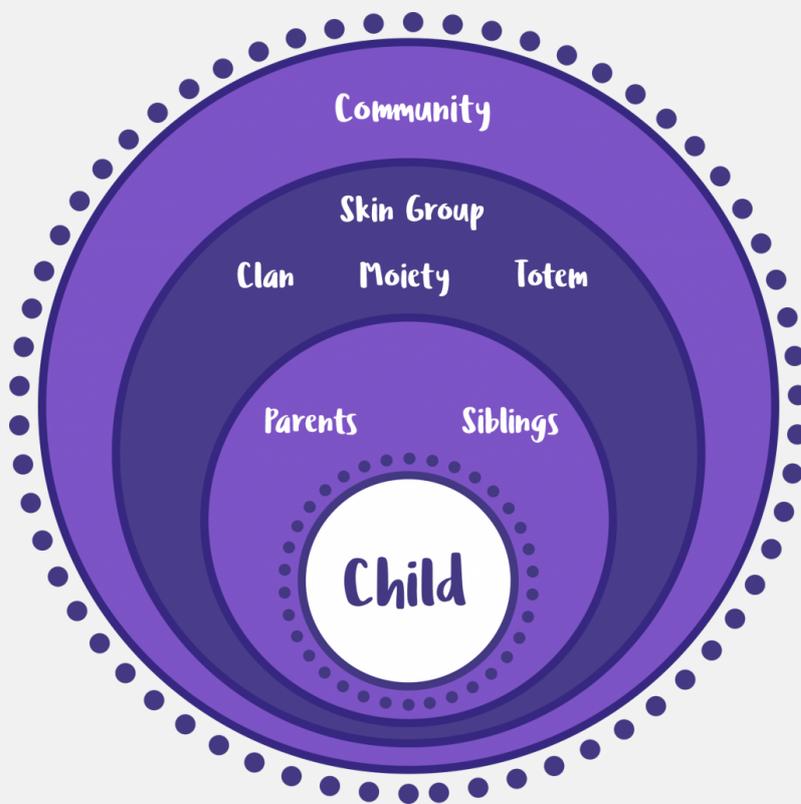
## Aboriginal Kinship Ties

Aboriginal people view individuals within a community holistically. Aboriginal understanding of the individual is in relation to the family, the community, the tribe, the land and the spiritual beings of the lore and dreaming. A person's physical, emotional, social, spiritual and cultural needs and well-being are intrinsically linked—they cannot be isolated. The person is not seen as separate, but in relationship to and with others. An Aboriginal perspective views:

- ⇒ the person's relationship to their whole family—not just to their parents and siblings
- ⇒ the person's relationship to their community—not just their family
- ⇒ the person's relationship to the land and the spirit beings which determine lore and meaning.<sup>6</sup>

Within Aboriginal communities, kinship networks are based on relationships of blood, marriage, association and spiritual significance. An Aboriginal person has brothers, sisters, mother, fathers, uncles and aunts, who are additional to relationships by blood

or marriage. Aboriginal children understand that these people are important in their life—they are people who will support them and on whom they can rely—they are family. These relationships are maintained through involvement in community. Even if they see each other infrequently, Aboriginal people describe a closeness that exists—‘like I saw her yesterday’. Each individual is important, has a role to play in the community and is accepted for both their strengths and limitations. Sharing is a strongly promoted value. There is a strong obligation to share if others are in need. The family, and one’s obligations to the family and community, are more important than material gain.<sup>7</sup> The diagram below shows the key features of a traditional Aboriginal family structure.<sup>8</sup>



## Respect for Elders

From a very young age, Aboriginal children are told about their relationships and links to others and are taught to show respect to their Elders. In Aboriginal communities, Elders play a vital leadership role.<sup>9</sup>

An Elder is an identified and respected man or woman within the community who has the trust, knowledge and understanding of their culture and permission to speak about it. They are often recognised as being able to provide advice, offer support and share wisdom in a confidential way with other members of the community, particularly younger



members.

Some Elders are referred to as Aunty or Uncle, but you should only use these titles when given permission to do so – simply asking is the best way to find out if you can do so or not. <sup>10</sup>

## Aboriginal Spiritual Relationship with the Land

Aboriginal people have a deep connection with the land or Country, which is central to their spiritual identity. This connection remains despite the many Aboriginal people who no longer live on their land. Aboriginal people describe the land as sustaining and comforting, fundamental to their health, their relationships and their culture and identity.

For Aboriginal people, their traditional Country and what it represents in terms of their history, survival, resilience and cultural and spiritual identity gives them much to take pride in. In the dominant Australian culture, land is thought of as a commodity to be used, enjoyed and owned — as a place to build a home or grow food or develop a park. Aboriginal people consider the land differently.

Aboriginal spiritual identity and connection to the land is expressed in the Dreamtime. In Aboriginal cultures, the Dreamtime tells of the beginning of life. Different Aboriginal groups have different dreamtime stories, but all teach about aspects that affect daily life. Dreamtime stories teach Aboriginal people about the importance of sharing with and caring for people of their community, of nurturing the land and of the significance of the land and its creatures.

Dreamtime stories pass on the history of Aboriginal people, their relationship with the land and their spiritual connection. For Aboriginal people, their connection to the Dreamtime is still alive and vital today and will remain so into the future. The complex set of spiritual values developed by Aboriginal people and that are part of the Dreamtime include 'self-control, self-reliance, courage, kinship and friendship, empathy, a holistic sense of oneness and interdependence, reverence for land and Country and a responsibility for others. <sup>11</sup>

The following diagram shows how, for Aboriginal people, all aspects of life are interconnected through the centrality of land and spirituality. <sup>12</sup>



## Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Flags

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags are particularly important for Aboriginal people. The flags can indicate pride, show great respect and leadership and can enhance healing. The power of messages conveyed by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags should not be underestimated. Mainstream organisations that display the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags demonstrate their support for Aboriginal people and those from the Torres Strait Islands. Understanding the history and meaning of the flags, and displaying the flags appropriately is a step towards creating a culturally safe workplace for Aboriginal staff.

### The Aboriginal Flag

Harold Thomas, an acclaimed artist, member of the Stolen Generations and a Luritja man from Central Australia, designed the Aboriginal flag. The flag was originally designed as a protest flag for the land rights movement of Aboriginal Australians. It is a symbol of identity, unity and Aboriginal rights.

The Aboriginal flag is divided horizontally into equal halves of black (top) and red (bottom) with a yellow circle in the centre. The black represents Aboriginal people. The red represents the earth, and spiritual relationships to the land. The yellow represents the sun, the giver of life and protector. Care should be taken to fly the Aboriginal flag properly, because grave offence has been caused when flags have been displayed upside down.

The Aboriginal flag was first raised in Adelaide on National Aboriginal Day on 12 July 1971 and was adopted nationally in 1972 when it was flown above the Aboriginal 'Tent Embassy' in Canberra. In 1995, the flag was proclaimed a 'Flag of Australia' under the Flags Act 1953, to reflect its increasing importance in Australian society.



## The Torres Strait Islander Flag

The Torres Strait Islander flag was created as a symbol of unity and identity for Torres Strait Islander people. It was designed by the late Bernard Namok, then a 15-year-old student from Thursday Island. It was recognised by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission in 1992. In 1995, the flag was proclaimed a 'Flag of Australia' under the Flags Act 1953, to reflect its increasing importance in Australian society.

The Torres Strait Islander flag features three horizontal coloured stripes, with green at the top and bottom and blue in the centre, divided by thin black lines. The colour green represents the land, the blue the sea and the black represents Indigenous people. A white dhari (headdress) sits in the centre with a five-pointed white star beneath it. The dhari represents the people of the Torres Strait Islands. The star represents the five major island groups, and the white colour represents peace. Used in navigation, the star is also an important symbol for the seafaring people of the Torres Strait.<sup>13</sup>



## Useful links and other information

(1, 4, 6, 7, 9, 11, 13) Source: VACCA Building Respect Partnerships 2010.

(2) [AIATSIS Stolen Generations](#)

(3) [AIATSIS Apology to Australia's Indigenous peoples](#)

(5) [AIATSIS map of Indigenous Australia](#)

(8, 12) Source: Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, September 2006, Working with Aboriginal Children and Families: A Guide for Child Protection and Child and Family Welfare Workers, Melbourne. Based on material from the NSW Office of the Children's Guardian

(10) [Supporting Carers \(SNAICC\) - Connection to Elders](#)



# Aboriginal Victoria Today

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## Victorian Aboriginal Demographics

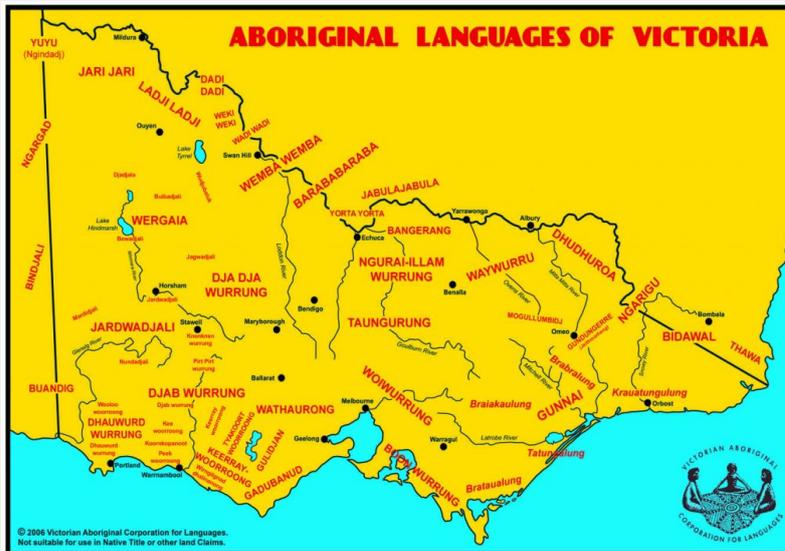
As of the 2016 Census, there were 47,788 Aboriginal people in Victoria, making up 0.8 per cent of the population. The median age for Aboriginal Victorians is 23, compared to 37 for other Victorians.<sup>1</sup>

Approximately 54 per cent of Aboriginal Victorians live in regional areas while 46 per cent live in metropolitan areas. Over 51% of the Victorian Aboriginal population live in one of fifteen local government areas. The Local Government Areas with the highest Aboriginal population are: Shepparton; Mildura; Geelong; Bendigo; Casey; East Gippsland; Darebin; Wyndham; Ballarat; Whittlesea; Latrobe; and Hume.<sup>2</sup>

## Victorian Aboriginal Languages

Before colonisation there were approximately 39 languages spoken across the area that is now Victoria. Language is a large part of Aboriginal culture and strengthens ties between Elders and young people and improves connection to culture and Country. The boundaries between Victorian Aboriginal language areas are not distinct and mixtures of vocabulary and grammar exist in some regions, therefore linguistic maps may show some variation about where one language ends and another begins.<sup>3</sup>

## Map of Victorian Aboriginal Languages



See more at [Aboriginal language map of Victoria](#).

The use of Aboriginal English is an aspect of contemporary Aboriginal culture. Users of Aboriginal English are making a statement about identity. Valuing and respecting someone's use of Aboriginal English indicates to them that you value them, their Aboriginality and their history.<sup>4</sup> Here are some examples of common words used in Victoria:<sup>5</sup>

Aboriginal English	Standard Australian English
mob	group
sorry business	ceremony associated with death
gammon	kidding, joking, pretending
deadly	really good



## Sorry Business – Bereavement and Funerals

Aboriginal people refer to the period of mourning when an Aboriginal person dies as 'Sorry Business'. It is an important period for Aboriginal people and involves responsibilities and obligations to attend funerals and participate in other cultural events, activities or ceremonies.

In some Aboriginal communities, the extent of obligations to participate in Sorry Business related to bereavement is dictated by the status of the deceased person and a person's kinship to them. It is very important to recognise that in many communities, there is an expectation that funerals involve the whole community and not just the immediate family and friends. Assumptions should not be made about the presumed 'closeness' or relationship of a person to the deceased in appreciating the necessity of their participation in Sorry Business. <sup>6</sup>

In a workplace, managers need to be aware that an Aboriginal worker will need to take time out to attend funerals, often to pay respects on behalf of their family or take extended periods of time off for Sorry Business when a family member has passed away.

### 'Men's business' and 'women's business'

'Men's business' and 'women's business' remain very important and sensitive issues within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture. Some information should only be talked about or negotiated and consulted on by people of the relevant gender. Information relating to 'women's business' should be stored in such a way that only women have access to it, and information that is 'men's business' stored in such a way that only men have access to it.

As such, when conducting research or consultation, it is important to plan ahead as to whether you will need both male and female researchers, consultants or project workers, in the event that matters concerning men's or women's business may be raised. <sup>7</sup>

In a workplace a manager needs to be aware that, for example, a female Aboriginal employee may be less inclined to open up to a male manager than if it was a female manager and vice versa.

## Contemporary Aboriginal Culture is Thriving

Despite the enormous odds presented by colonisation, forced removal, discrimination



and injustice, Aboriginal communities and cultures are thriving: strong kinship ties and social obligations continue; cultural centres, Aboriginal art, film, dance and theatre and activities celebrating Aboriginal cultures and significant events demonstrate the resilience of Aboriginal communities and cultures. <sup>8</sup>

## Questions for managers and workplaces:

Have you and your staff attended cultural awareness training?

Do you know where you can access information regarding who the Traditional Owners are and local Aboriginal history?

Do you understand the ongoing impact of past government policies and practices on Aboriginal people?

Do you understand that an Aboriginal employee working for you may have family obligations that may have an impact on work?

Does your workplace display the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Flags?

Are you and your staff aware of and able to talk about the history of the flags?

Do you understand 'Sorry Business' and how it impacts an Aboriginal worker?

Do you understand how men's and women's business may have an impact on the relationship with Aboriginal employees working for you?



## Useful links and other information

Further information on [Aboriginal cultural heritage of Victoria](#).

Further information on [Aboriginal culture](#).

For further information on [Aboriginal languages](#).

The [Deadly Story website](#) has been produced by the Victorian Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Agency (VACCA) and includes an interactive Country map that interviews with role models and Elders in the community; articles; event info and more.

The [Deadly Questions website](#) allows non-Aboriginal people to ask questions of and about Aboriginal people in an attempt to build understanding.

(1) Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016.

(2) Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011.

(3) [VACL Language Map of Victoria](#)

(4, 5, 6, 7) Working and Walking Together: Supporting Family Relationship Services to Work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Families and Organisations.

(8) Source: VACCA Building Respectful Partnerships 2010.



# Aboriginal Protocols



Respectful relationships and partnerships with Aboriginal communities will involve an understanding and respect for protocols. Ceremonies and protocols are an important part of Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander culture.

By incorporating them into official events we can recognise and pay respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, culture and heritage and demonstrate recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's unique position in Australian society.<sup>1</sup>

It is important to remember that Aboriginal cultural protocols differ between communities and regions, and you should not rely on your Aboriginal employees to be responsible for ensuring protocols are met. For example, do not expect that your Aboriginal employees will perform an Acknowledgment of Country at every meeting or that they will have the authority to perform a Welcome to Country. If unsure whether you are following protocols it is recommended to check in with an Aboriginal person or organisation for advice.

## Acknowledgment of Country and Elders

An Acknowledgement of Country, also known as Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners, can be done by anyone and is a way of showing awareness of, and respect for, the Aboriginal Traditional Owners of the land on which a meeting or event is being held. For a non-Aboriginal person, or an Aboriginal person who is not a descendant of that tribal land, acknowledging the local Aboriginal people as the Traditional Owners is a mark of respect. It is also respectful to acknowledge Elders past and present.

Your Acknowledgment of the Traditional Owners of the land implies:

- ⇒ your appreciation of the importance of the land to local Aboriginal people
- ⇒ your commitment to work in partnership with local Aboriginal people to protect the land and the physical traces of Aboriginal culture and history, such as sacred burial sites, art and ceremonial grounds
- ⇒ your recognition of the unique position the land holds for Aboriginal people
- ⇒ your understanding of the struggle and pain that Aboriginal people have endured over centuries in being removed from their land.



Example of an Acknowledgement of Country:

“I would like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the Land we are meeting on today; the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nations. I pay my respects to their Elders past, present and emerging and extend that respect to all Aboriginal people here today.”

## Welcome to Country

A Welcome to Country is not the same as an Acknowledgement of Country. It provides an opportunity for the local Aboriginal people to welcome you to their country. At the opening of a new building or new program, you may want to welcome those attending. However, it is the right of local Aboriginal people to first welcome you to their land. The Welcome to Country values Aboriginal people and recognises the ancestral spirits who created the boundaries and lands, which allow safe passage to visitors.

The Welcome to Country has been part of Aboriginal ways for thousands of years. It can only be performed by an Elder or respected person who is from the local clan and been given permission to do so.

There are many ways that an Aboriginal person may perform a ‘Welcome to Country’. It may consist of a single speech, or include a performance (a song, dance, didgeridoo solo etc.), a smoking or cleansing ceremony—or a combination of these. Ceremonies and practices reflect the vibrant nature of Aboriginal culture. By supporting their inclusion, you will be introducing Aboriginal culture to a group of people who otherwise may not have enjoyed such experiences.

## Smoking Ceremonies

A smoking ceremony is an ancient custom among some Aboriginal tribes that involves smouldering various native plants to produce smoke which has cleansing properties and the ability to ward off bad spirits, and are still performed today. They are also used in the context of healing, spiritual renewal and strengthening by some Aboriginal healing practitioners. This ceremony is a ritual of purification and unity and is undertaken by an Aboriginal person with specialised cultural knowledge. Given the significant nature of the ceremony, it is usually only performed at events regarded as appropriate by the Aboriginal community.



## Fees for Cultural Services

In providing cultural services such as 'Welcome to Country,' artistic performances and ceremonies, it is important to acknowledge that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are using their own time and intellectual property. For this reason, it is appropriate that people are offered payment and appropriate remuneration for their services. Appropriate payment and remuneration should be negotiated, considering speaker fees, travel to and from the event as well as the public profile nature of the event.

## Community Engagement and Partnerships

A partnership with an Aboriginal community is much more than simply writing a memorandum of understanding or a protocol, calling something a partnership, or including self-determination as an organisational value. Engagement policies and protocols should respect the role of different Aboriginal community groups and outline the basis of the relationship. They may outline consultative processes or establish mechanisms for engagement such as an advisory committee to your organisation and should be developed in consultation with the relevant Aboriginal community and where possible seek the guidance and advice of the Local Aboriginal Network (LAN).

The Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework (VAAF) is underpinned by self-determination and is driven by the following 11 self-determination guiding principles, which set the minimum standard for all work with Aboriginal Victorians:

1. **Human rights:** Self-determination initiatives honour the norms set out in UNDRIP and Victoria's Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006.
2. **Cultural integrity:** As First Nations peoples, the rich, thriving cultures, knowledge and diverse experiences of Aboriginal people, including where they fit with family, community and society, will be recognised, valued, heard and celebrated.
3. **Commitment:** Aboriginal self-determination will be advanced and embedded through planned action that is endorsed by, and accountable to, all parties.
4. **Aboriginal expertise:** Government and agencies will seek out, value and embed Aboriginal culture, knowledge, expertise and diverse perspectives in policies and practice.
5. **Partnerships:** Partnerships will advance Aboriginal autonomy through equitable participation, shared authority and decision-making, and will be underpinned by cultural integrity.
6. **Investment:** Investment to support self-determination will be sustainable, flexible and appropriate to strengthen Aboriginal peoples' aspirations and participation,



including around economic participation, economic independence and building wealth.

7. **Decision-making:** Decision-makers will respect the right to free, prior and informed consent and individual choice and will prioritise the transfer of decision-making power to Aboriginal people in areas that impact their communities.
8. **Empowerment:** Aboriginal people will have autonomy and participation in the development, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of legislation, policies and programs that impact their communities.
9. **Cultural safety:** Programs and services accessed by Aboriginal people will be inclusive, respectful, responsive and relevant, and informed by culturally safe practice frameworks.
10. **Equity:** Systemic and structural racism, discrimination and unconscious bias and other barriers to Aboriginal self-determination will be actively identified and eliminated.
11. **Accountability:** All parties responsible for delivering outcomes involving Aboriginal people will be held accountable and subject to Aboriginal-led, independent and transparent oversight.<sup>2</sup>

## Questions for managers and workplaces in following cultural protocols:

Do you begin organisational meetings and community forums with an Acknowledgment of the Traditional Owners?

Do you ask Elders from the local Aboriginal community to conduct a Welcome to Country to begin any ceremony to mark the opening of premises, new programs or major events and do you provide payment for the local Aboriginal community to perform this ceremony for your organisation?

If unsure about whether you are following the correct protocols do you ask for advice from an Aboriginal person?

Are you aware when working with Aboriginal communities/organisations that creating relationships and partnerships takes time?

Do you provide a fee-for-service when seeking cultural advice/support from Elders and Aboriginal community controlled organisations?



## Useful links and other information

Further information on [Welcome to Country and Acknowledgment of Traditional Owners](#); steps to determine which is required; tips on what to say during an Acknowledgement; and tips on organising a Welcome to Country

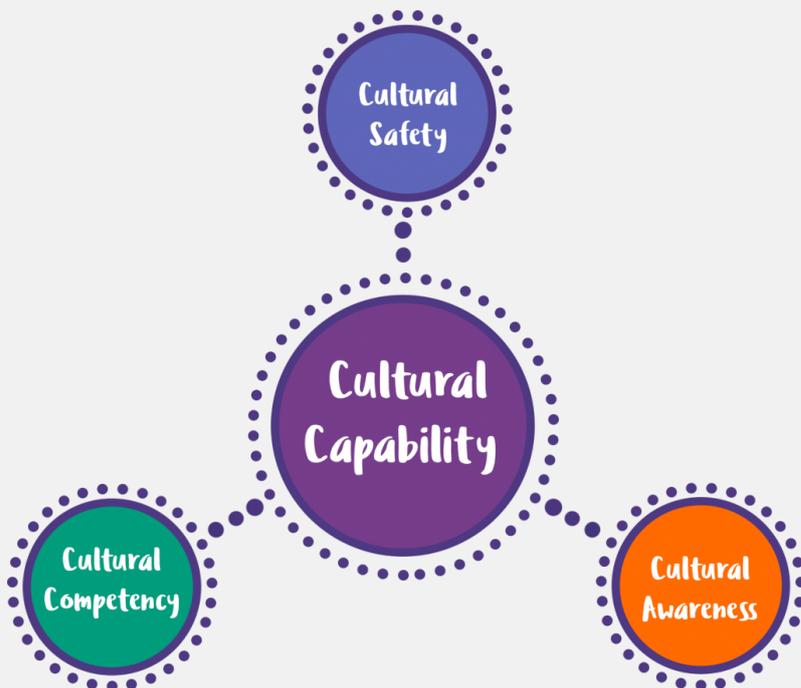
[Map of Victorian Traditional Owners](#)

(1) [SNAICC – Cultural Protocols](#)

(2) Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework 2018-2023.

# Aboriginal Cultural Capability

Cultural capability is a broad term that encompasses cultural awareness, cultural safety and cultural competence. Cultural capability is not achieved after one training session or at a single end-point but represents continuous learning that builds over time.



## Cultural Awareness

Cultural awareness means being aware of, and developing sensitivity to, cultural difference and cultural diversity. It involves knowledge, attitudes and values that demonstrate an openness and respect for other people and other cultures, languages, religions, dress, communication styles and so on. For example, in some Aboriginal cultures it may be considered rude or disrespectful to make eye contact, while in others it is not.<sup>1</sup>

## Cultural Safety

Cultural safety is an environment which is safe for Aboriginal people, where there is no assault, challenge or denial of their identity and experience. Cultural safety is about



individuals, organisations and systems being aware of the impact of their own culture and cultural values on Aboriginal people, while creating and maintaining an environment where all people are treated in a culturally respectful manner.

Tips for achieving a culturally safe workplace:

- ⇒ Include an Acknowledgment of Country at the beginning of all formal meetings.
- ⇒ Have an Acknowledgment plaque at the entrance to your building that acknowledges the Traditional Owners of your area.
- ⇒ Display Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags around the building
- ⇒ Display Aboriginal art in workplaces.
- ⇒ Participate in local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community events and celebrations, such as NAIDOC Week, the commemoration of the National Apology to the Stolen Generations and National Aboriginal and Islander Children's Day.
- ⇒ Use Aboriginal artwork and designs in its promotional and educational material intended for Aboriginal people. However, it is important to ensure that you respect the copyright and intellectual property of the Aboriginal artists and creative workers who created the artwork. For more information please see [Working and Walking Together \(PDF, 5.7mb\)](#).

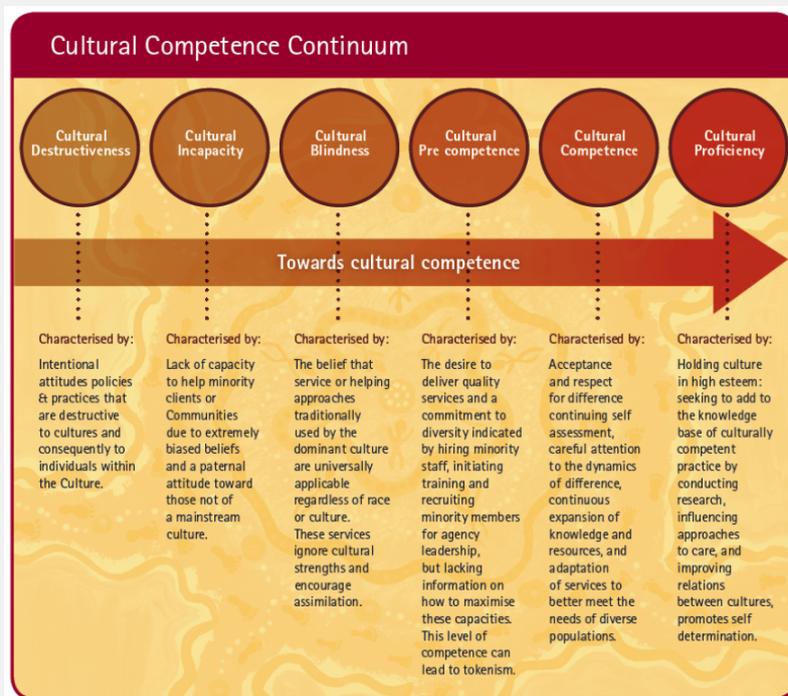
## Measures of a culturally safe workplace:

- ⇒ Cultural safety is an organisational value and is negotiated with local Aboriginal communities.
- ⇒ Policies and procedures are reviewed and refreshed based on Aboriginal staff and community feedback and are aligned with the VAAF and self-determination principles.
- ⇒ Local Aboriginal communities and the organisation negotiate strategic approaches, goals and outcomes.
- ⇒ The organisation has systems to determine current proficiency and capability levels and to identify a learning or development plan based on the organisations learning needs.
- ⇒ The Commonwealth public sector Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Capability Map are broken cultural capabilities into: knowing; doing; and being. The 'foundation' level that applies to all Commonwealth employees regardless of role, function, or level lists the following capabilities.<sup>2</sup>

## Cultural Competency

Cultural competency is a set of behaviours, attitudes and policies that come together to allow people to work effectively in cross-cultural situations. It is best understood as something people move towards along a continuum rather than a point in time achievement. See [VACCA Building Respectful Partnerships 2010 \(PDF, 1.8mb\)](#).

This diagram draws from work done by VACCA for the Aboriginal Cultural Competency Framework and Muriel Bamblett's Keynote Speech at SNAICC 2007 National Conference in Adelaide, which in turn drew from work by Terry Cross of the National Indian Child Welfare Association (US).



## Cultural Capability Training

Cultural capability training is an integral part of workplace health and safety and is essential for enabling cultural safety in the workplace. Cultural capability training should be ongoing rather than just done once. There are many aspects to cultural capability training, such as: cultural awareness, cultural competency and unconscious bias.

Many Victorian Aboriginal organisations provide cultural training. Try to choose a local Aboriginal training provider who has knowledge of local Aboriginal history and culture. You should contact your local Traditional Owners or Local Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO) to discuss training options. Some organisations have



Traditional Owner Settlement Agreements and therefore must seek training through appropriate Traditional Owners.

Questions for managers and workplaces when building cultural capability:

- ⇒ What strategies have you put in place to build cultural competency and cultural safety for your staff and the Aboriginal people working within your area/organisation?
- ⇒ Has your team completed any cultural awareness/cultural competency training?
- ⇒ Does your team celebrate significant Aboriginal cultural events?
- ⇒ Do you identify and challenge inappropriate behaviours in others and create a safe space for Aboriginal staff to report if required?
- ⇒ Do you understand what is expected of you in responding to racism, discrimination and cultural abuse?

## Useful links and other information



The [‘Deadly Story’ website](#) has a list of Aboriginal service providers across Victoria. You can use the list to find an organisation local to your area.

More information on doing an [Acknowledgement of Country](#)

[Purchasing Acknowledgement plaques](#)

[Information on how to display flags](#)

(1) [Working with Indigenous Australians – Culture](#)

(2) [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural capability: A framework for Commonwealth agencies](#)



- 
- ⇒ simultaneously. Traineeships use competency-based training focusing on performance rather than knowledge.
  - ⇒ Use of employment or recruitment agencies
  - ⇒ Advertising through a range of ways.

## Designing and describing position descriptions

Prior to advertising and recruitment, it is important to think about what a job involves, including the most appropriate skills, attributes, knowledge and experience required. Use plain English and inclusive language and avoid using jargon. To attract a broader range of applicants, you might focus on what the person in the role will be doing and the skills they will need rather than on formal qualifications, particularly where these qualifications are not mandatory requirements of a role. Often qualifications listed as mandatory on position descriptions can be replaced with life experience or professional experience and practical knowledge.

In some cases, Key Selection Criteria (KSC) could assess the potential of applicants to grow into the role. This often results in a broader group of applicants with a range of different skills. You should place value on life experience, practical knowledge and connections to Community as part of the KSC. Offer to clarify the KSC and offer the opportunity to seek assistance with drafting answers.

## Advertising

While you should follow your organisation's usual marketing strategies, it is beneficial to follow some extra steps to attract and recruit Aboriginal staff.

Some good advertising channels for attracting Aboriginal staff that can be employed alongside conventional methods are:

- ⇒ Word of mouth
- ⇒ Koori Mail
- ⇒ Social media
- ⇒ Career Trackers
- ⇒ Indigenous Employment Australia
- ⇒ National Indigenous Radio Service

Make all of your organisation's job advertisements attractive to Aboriginal candidates by including the following:

- 
- ⇒ A clear description of the role
  - ⇒ Leave entitlements including cultural leave
  - ⇒ Hours of work and potential for flexible working arrangements
  - ⇒ Innovative approaches such as using new technology
  - ⇒ The statement “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are encouraged to apply for this job”
  - ⇒ Images of Aboriginal staff members working in your organisations (with their consent).

Make sure time frames for applications are long enough for people to hear about the position through word-of-mouth.

## Interviewing Aboriginal Staff

Like all potential recruits, Aboriginal people come from different backgrounds and communities and have different ways of doing things. Communication styles will differ and what works for one Aboriginal recruit may not work for another, especially when you are recruiting employees across a range of levels. The following are helpful suggestions for you to consider when interviewing Aboriginal staff:

- ⇒ Ensure the interview space is welcoming and culturally safe.
- ⇒ Provide interview questions prior to the interview to reduce anxiety and ensure interviewees have the opportunity to present their best case.
- ⇒ Engage existing Aboriginal employees in promoting the benefits of a career in your organisation. For example attending Aboriginal job fairs or speaking in a promotional video.
- ⇒ Provide recruitment information to Aboriginal Community organisations, networks, employment and careers expos and community events.
- ⇒ Include an Aboriginal person on the selection panel.
- ⇒ Include an Aboriginal male on the selection panel for Aboriginal male candidates and an Aboriginal female on the panel for Aboriginal female candidates whenever possible.
- ⇒ Ensure panel members have completed cultural capability training, unconscious bias training and merit-based selection training.
- ⇒ Provide support to applicants before the interview, e.g. provide clear instructions about access to the building, the selection process and interview format and panel members.
- ⇒ Be aware that there could be differences in communication styles, e.g. silences

- 
- 
- ⇒ might be longer for some Aboriginal people as they provide an opportunity for deeper thought and it may not be polite for some Aboriginal people to make lots of eye contact.<sup>1</sup>
  - ⇒ Be aware that, for some Aboriginal people, self-advocating or “talking yourself up” may not come naturally due to social and cultural norms. Some Aboriginal applicants may be inclined to speak more in terms of team or group outcomes rather than personal achievements.

## Recruitment of non-Aboriginal staff

Recruitment of non-Aboriginal staff, carers and volunteers should include a focus on cultural capability. Staff selection must, for example, assess whether applicants understand the historical and contemporary issues that affect Aboriginal people.

## Aboriginal Employment Officers and Aboriginal Employment Plans

Aboriginal Employment Officers (AEO) and Aboriginal Employment Plans (AEP) are best practice for recruiting and retaining Aboriginal staff and ensuring your organisation is culturally competent and safe.

## What is an Aboriginal Employment Officer?

An AEO is responsible for:

- ⇒ Providing ongoing support to new and existing Aboriginal staff
- ⇒ Developing an AEP and coordinating its implementation
- ⇒ Providing ongoing support to stakeholders, including managers, as well as establishing and maintaining external relationships.

While some of this work can be done by human resources staff, experience shows that this does not deliver results and does not provide the necessary support to Aboriginal staff or the necessary focus for an AEP.

Tips for engaging an AEO:

- ⇒ If possible, invest in an ongoing, full time, AEO role
- ⇒ If your organisation cannot appoint its own AEO, try and share an AEO with another organisation

- 
- ⇒ If the AEO is appointed from outside the organisation, ensure that have full access to consult and collaborate broadly and effectively

## What is an Aboriginal Employment Plan?

An AEP is a comprehensive plan that sets out a series of coordinated and consistent organisational activities to increase the number of Aboriginal employees.

An AEP will:

- ⇒ Provide the basis for agreement about activities to be undertaken
- ⇒ Specify what actions are to be undertaken
- ⇒ Identify who will be responsible for initiatives, as well as designating overall responsibility
- ⇒ Highlight implementation timelines
- ⇒ Provide the basis for benchmarking progress and reporting

Tips for developing an AEP:

- ⇒ Ensure there is a plan with a clear picture of who, what, how, when, and how much is being invested
- ⇒ Set up management structures that provide clear lines for endorsement and accountability
- ⇒ Include as many people from as many different areas of the organisation as possible during the planning phase.

View an example of the [Victorian Department of Premier and Cabinet's plan](#).

## Induction

A good induction process is vital for all new employees. It helps new staff feel welcome and comfortable and provides them with the information they need to effectively perform the role. Employees will have different levels of work experience, different cultural backgrounds and different professional expectations and you should tailor the induction process according to the specific needs of each new employee.

General induction tips for all new staff:

- ⇒ Introduce the new staff member to other staff and management, e.g. through a welcome morning tea

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- ⇒ Provide an induction kit with organisational policies and other material
  - ⇒ Advise new staff of the available support mechanisms
  - ⇒ Provide a clear outline of the job expectations and explain organisational systems and policies.

Additional induction tips for new Aboriginal staff:

- ⇒ Connect new Aboriginal staff members with existing Aboriginal networks within the workplace or sector
- ⇒ Advise Aboriginal staff about the availability of specific leave entitlements and the scope for using different types of leave for cultural and caring responsibilities and sorry business.
- ⇒ Outline the mentoring, training and other career development options your organisation makes available for Aboriginal staff.

Plan an initial conversation with a new Aboriginal employee to:

- ⇒ Let them know you have an open door policy
- ⇒ Discuss their particular cultural obligations and needs
- ⇒ Discuss what supervision approached they prefer.

## **Induction of non-Aboriginal staff is an opportunity to build cultural capability**

Organisational induction for non-Aboriginal staff provides an opportunity to build Aboriginal cultural competence when it:

- ⇒ explains the organisation's values and vision, including support for Aboriginal self-determination and social justice
- ⇒ outlines the journey the organisation has taken in the way they deliver services to Aboriginal children and families
- ⇒ describes the organisation's code of conduct, including commitment to cultural safety and intolerance of racism and cultural abuse
- ⇒ explains intergenerational trauma and lateral violence
- ⇒ highlights the organisation's commitment to Aboriginal cultural competence, including discussing and encouraging attendance at further training, which aims to build cultural competence
- ⇒ describes the organisation's current role with Aboriginal children and families

- 
- ⇒ emphasises the role of partnerships with Aboriginal organisations as vital to effective service delivery
  - ⇒ emphasises that in agreeing to work for the organisation, staff sign on to the organisation's code of conduct and commitment to cultural competence.

## Questions for managers and workplaces when recruiting and inducting Aboriginal staff:

- ⇒ Do you have an Aboriginal inclusion plan to attract, recruit and retain Aboriginal staff?
- ⇒ Do your recruitment approaches attract Aboriginal applicants and lead to recruitment of Aboriginal staff?
- ⇒ Does your area/organisation induction for all new staff, carers and volunteers include:
  - ⇒ the organisation's support for Aboriginal self-determination and social justice?
  - ⇒ The organisations commitment to cultural capability and cultural awareness or cultural safety content in the training?
  - ⇒ the organisation's commitment to cultural safety and intolerance of racism and cultural abuse?
  - ⇒ the organisation's commitment to cultural capability?

## Useful links and other information



[Aboriginal Employment Plan Example 1 - DEWLP](#)

[Aboriginal Employment Plan Example 2 - DOJR](#)

(1) Source: National Association of Community Legal Centres Recruiting and Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Employees: A guide for community legal centres 2017.



# Supporting Aboriginal Staff



Wellbeing is integral to a productive and happy workplace. Some important things you can do for Aboriginal wellbeing include:

- ⇒ Promote and support the importance of cultural connections in building resilience and wellbeing.
- ⇒ Consider how you can ensure cultural safety for Aboriginal people from the moment they enter the workplace.
- ⇒ Adopt a holistic approach to supporting Aboriginal people where the focus is broader than any single issue.
- ⇒ Checking in informally and providing regular supervision where you are asking questions like “How are you travelling?” allow the conversation about wellbeing to happen.
- ⇒ Ensure your employees are aware of any existing Employee Assistance Programs.
- ⇒ Encourage healthy lifestyle and physical activities in the workplace.
- ⇒ Discuss and if possible negotiate flexible working arrangements so employees are more likely to feel supported and valued.

Good working relationships are also very important for the wellbeing of Aboriginal staff. The VACCA publication Working with [Aboriginal Children and Families: A Guide for Child Protection and Child and Family Welfare Workers \(PDF, 5.7MB\)](#) outlines that good working relationships are more likely to exist when non-Aboriginal workers are aware that:

- ⇒ Building working relationships takes time and needs to be based on mutual respect for similarities and differences.
- ⇒ Relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal workers means breaking down barriers and going the extra step in building respectful, personal and non-judgemental relationships.
- ⇒ Aboriginal employees know that they are part of the same community as their clients and so must keep this in mind when developing working relationships. Aboriginal employees may also have experience of issues such as grief, loss and trauma and will be at various stages in their own journey to healing.
- ⇒ Aboriginal employees would agree that they are not experts on all aspects of Aboriginal culture and community life. Aboriginal employees are required to

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- ⇒ respect their cultural boundaries and what authority they have been given to discuss certain things. This is not, however, a license to exclude Aboriginal employees.
  - ⇒ Aboriginal employees are often utilised to respond to all things Aboriginal in the workplace and speak on behalf of all Aboriginal people. This adds to employees cultural load and is a risk to employee wellbeing.

## Aboriginal Cultural Loads

It is also important to remember that Aboriginal people are more likely to have caring responsibilities and cultural and/or community obligations outside of the workplace that non Aboriginal co-workers do not have. This is called 'cultural load' and includes:

- ⇒ Caring for family members
- ⇒ Sitting on local advisory councils and boards
- ⇒ Being held accountable within the community for decisions made by your organisation
- ⇒ Racism
- ⇒ Intergenerational trauma
- ⇒ Lateral violence
- ⇒ Living and working off Country

## Flexible working arrangements

Some of your Aboriginal staff may need flexible working arrangements for reasons such as:

- ⇒ Sorry Business
- ⇒ Child care responsibility
- ⇒ Cultural responsibilities.

If you notice a change in your employee, such as they are regularly arriving late or seeming unhappy at work, it is best to have a conversation with them. Ask them what is going on and have a discussion about how best you can support them. This could include changed work hours, working from home, sharing responsibilities at work along with a range of other support mechanisms. Adequate arrangements for bereavement leave should be available for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff to attend funerals and observe Sorry Business.



## Racism at Work

It is also important to understand that unfortunately, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers also frequently encounter racism and prejudice from co-workers and non-Indigenous clients. It is important to be aware that these experiences can range from overt racism, such as derogatory name-calling, to the subtle but equally toxic prejudice and assumptions around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff members and their work practices.

This can include remarks or gossip about staff working hours, field visits, or leave for customary practices such as Sorry Business as well as prejudices around work capability. Without transparency, education or cultural awareness, colleagues and supervisors can fail to recognise how much work Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers are expected to do outside the office, the importance of outreach work, or the cultural obligations around matters such as bereavement or Sorry Business. <sup>2</sup>

Your role as a manager is to:

- ⇒ Provide an open door policy for Aboriginal to discuss any issues they are having in the workplace.
- ⇒ Listen out for or observe unacceptable behaviours in the workplace.
- ⇒ Call out any unacceptable behaviours and follow policies and procedures to address.
- ⇒ Ensure the Aboriginal worker is supported through the process.

## Shame in the workplace

Aboriginal staff may experience shame when being asked to share personal information or being asked to talk about personal achievements etc.

Shame extends to include embarrassment in certain situations and is often due to attention or circumstances rather than as a result of an action by oneself.

The feeling of shame can totally overwhelm and disempower a person. <sup>3</sup>

## Workplace Cultural Safety

A [culturally safe work place](#) is essential for Aboriginal staff wellbeing.



## Supporting further training and study

Aboriginal staff may want to continue increasing their knowledge and skills. Supporting your staff in these areas results in better performance, higher retention rates and increases the value they bring to the organisation.

## Mentoring

A mentoring relationship involves sharing experiences and expertise through advice, support and encouragement. It helps those being mentored to achieve their full potential, both professionally and personally.

It should be based on honesty, mutual trust, respect, confidentiality and a willingness to share and learn. For Aboriginal staff, mentoring from an Aboriginal professional is the ideal. It can provide cultural guidance, pass on cultural knowledge and practices and reduce isolation by providing connection to the Aboriginal community. Mentoring can be formal or informal.

## Formal Mentoring Programs

Formal workplace mentoring involves a structured agreement between two people.

Good formal mentoring:

- ⇒ Identifies a suitable mentor who is not the employees line manager
- ⇒ Is career-focused or focused on professional development outside the mentees regular work
- ⇒ Involves relationships that provide professional and personal support

The relationships run for a specific time in a formal program, though the pair may choose to continue informally.<sup>4</sup>

## Informal Mentor Relationships

Many Aboriginal employees will already have informal mentor relationships or will quickly establish relationships with other Aboriginal staff who will act as both personal and professional mentors.

When you have recruited an Aboriginal person to a senior position, it is likely that they already have existing relationships in which they are the mentor.



Informal mentoring relationships are extremely beneficial as the matches are natural and not forced and are often maintained over a long period of time. Being part of an informal mentor relationship should not exclude any employees from formal workplace mentoring.

## Sponsoring

Sponsoring gives workers an experience in a different role. Sponsoring is often done with a more senior staff member who actively engages the more junior member to work on a project together. Always discuss a potential sponsoring with your employee first.

Tips for establishing good sponsoring:

- ⇒ Initiate sponsoring in an area of work that the employee/sponsee has expressed interest in
- ⇒ Ensure the sponsor is committed to the project and to the sponsee.

## Foundations for Good Supervisory Relationships

Good relationships between a manager and staff member are built on the respect and value accorded to the unique role that Aboriginal staff can have within organisations. Managers should acknowledge the skills and knowledge that Aboriginal professionals bring to the organisation. Supervisors also need to:

- ⇒ understand the demands on Aboriginal workers, who may be part of the same community as their clients
- ⇒ realise that Aboriginal professionals are unlikely to respect you simply because of your position in the organisation, because the Aboriginal way is based on relationships that can only be built over time
- ⇒ recognise that understanding who you are and taking time to build relationships are important foundations for supervision
- ⇒ acknowledge the importance of community relationships and events for Aboriginal professionals
- ⇒ acknowledge the added challenges for Aboriginal staff in supporting other staff to build relationships with Aboriginal communities
- ⇒ supervise Aboriginal staff in the way that is most comfortable for them, and be aware of the impact of language and venue
- ⇒ support Aboriginal staff to access cultural support and mentoring from an appropriate Aboriginal organisation or Aboriginal professional



expect that Aboriginal staff, like all staff in your organisation, adhere to the organisation's code of conduct and professional standards of behaviour<sup>5</sup> address issues as they arise and provide feedback promptly.

## Questions for managers and workplaces in supporting Aboriginal staff:

Do you support Aboriginal staff through personal, family and cultural commitments and provide support/services for impacts of grief, loss and trauma?

Do you promote cultural safety and the responsibility of all staff, carers and volunteers to treat Aboriginal people respectfully and respond quickly and appropriately to racism, discrimination or cultural abuse?

Do you clearly display information regarding what staff, carers, volunteers and community members can do if they believe they have been treated in a racist or culturally abusive way by someone within the organisation?

How do you encourage and support staff, carers and volunteers to make disclosures regarding racism, discrimination or cultural abuse and have a documented policy and procedure for managing it if it occurs?

Are Aboriginal people who make disclosures regarding racism, discrimination or cultural abuse provided with culturally appropriate support throughout the report/investigation process?

How do you protect Aboriginal staff from being overwhelmed by the demands made of the 'expert'? How does the organisation support Aboriginal staff in this role?

Does the organisation's employee assistance program (EAP) give Aboriginal staff choice about accessing an Aboriginal counsellor?

Are Aboriginal staff supported and given time to attend significant community events (for example, events during NAIDOC week)?

Are Aboriginal staff provided with access to other Aboriginal staff, either within or outside the organisation, for support and mentoring?

Are Aboriginal staff encouraged, resourced and supported to become workplace mentors for other staff?

Is there a formal partnership in place with your local Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation to provide cultural support and mentoring to Aboriginal staff in your organisation?



## Useful links and other information

[Reconciliation Victoria outline of 'what cultural safety should look like in the work place', created for local councils.](#)

Uncle Richard Franklin discussing cultural load:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E9AxZ2QseA0>

(1) Working with Aboriginal Children and Families: A Guide for Child Protection and Child and Family Welfare Workers. VACCA 2006

(2) [Working and Walking Together: Supporting Family Relationship Services to Work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Families and Organisations](#)

(3) [The Concept of Shame](#)

(4) [Definition of Mentoring, Benefits of Mentoring, & Other FAQs](#)

(5) Source: VACCA Building Respectful Partnerships 2010.



# Career Development for Aboriginal Staff



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Everyone within your organisation requires career development and performance monitoring for success. This includes supervision, feedback and opportunities to explore new roles as well as ongoing training and study options.

Many Aboriginal people have not had the same opportunities as non-Aboriginal people to study and gain formal qualifications because of the disadvantage they experienced in terms of health, education and housing, discrimination in the education system and ongoing experiences of cultural abuse and racism. Opportunities to build skills through professional development, study and secondments are important in terms of:

- ⇒ Individual professional development for Aboriginal staff
- ⇒ Ensuring effective services are delivered by these staff
- ⇒ Building cultural and practice skills in your organisation.

Organisations should ensure Aboriginal staff are supported throughout their study or secondments in a culturally appropriate way.

Professional development of individual Aboriginal staff makes an important contribution to capacity building in Aboriginal communities. Supporting and facilitating Aboriginal staff to gain qualifications and expertise across a range of areas contributes to Aboriginal community capacity building and to restoring to those communities the ability to make their own decisions and deliver their own programs to their communities.<sup>1</sup>

Tips for best practice in career managing Aboriginal employees:

- ⇒ Aboriginal staff like all staff like to hear feedback about their performance and ongoing encouragement and acknowledgement is important in building confidence and supporting career development.
- ⇒ Aboriginal staff may need support and encouragement to go to training, enter a qualification or to apply for the next level up position.
- ⇒ Create an open and trusting relationship and ensure staff feel comfortable and safe to express themselves and eliminate feelings of shame.
- ⇒ Do not pigeonhole Aboriginal staff into identified or designated positions, even if

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- 
- ⇒ they were recruited to one, and make it clear that there is room to move and explore different areas.
  - ⇒ Provide opportunities for ongoing training and study in areas that your employee has expressed interest in.

## Questions for managers and workplaces in supporting career development of Aboriginal staff:

- ⇒ Do you create professional development plans for Aboriginal staff?
- ⇒ How are Aboriginal staff encouraged, supported and resourced by the organisation to access further training and gain qualifications?
- ⇒ Are Aboriginal staff to provided with opportunities for experiences and skill development through secondments within the organisation?
- ⇒ Does the organisation actively support Aboriginal students through student placements across the organisation?
- ⇒ When you ask questions of staff who leave the organisation: Are Aboriginal people given the opportunity to discuss their experiences in the organisation with a person of their choice, including an Aboriginal person?



### Useful links and other information

(1) Source: VACCA Building Respectful Partnerships 2010.



# Glossary of Terms

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Aboriginal, used through this toolkit, refers to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The term 'Indigenous' is not used in this toolkit as historically it was a word used to describe animals and plants and then used to include Aboriginal people. When referring to Aboriginal people, you should refer to them by their language group – e.g. Yorta Yorta or Dja Dja Wurrung – or their broader geographical identity – e.g. Koori or Koorie in Victoria and NSW and Murri in Queensland.<sup>1</sup>

## Community

Community refers to and acknowledges all Aboriginal people living in Victoria. Community can be used to describe the entire Victorian Aboriginal Community or smaller specific Communities.

## Country/Land

Country and Land encompasses everything within the landscape including: landforms, water, air, trees, rocks, plants, animals, medicines, minerals, stories and special places. Country also includes cultural practices, knowledge, songs, stories, art and people past, present and future. Aboriginal people have custodial responsibility to care for their Country.

## Cultural abuse

Cultural abuse happens when abusers use aspects of a victim's cultural identity to inflict suffering, or as a means of control.<sup>2</sup> Cultural abuse can include: using racial slurs, mocking someone's accent or appearance, or not letting someone observe cultural days.

## Cultural safety

Cultural safety means “an environment that is safe for people: where there is no assault, challenge or denial of their identity, of who they are and what they need. It is about shared respect, shared knowledge and experience, of learning, living and working together with dignity and truly listening”.<sup>3</sup>



## Designated position

A designated position requires a demonstrated knowledge and understanding of the Victorian Aboriginal Community, society and culture. You can only fill a designated position with an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander applicant.

## Elders

An Elder is a respected member of the Community who has gained recognition as a custodian of knowledge and lore, and who has permission to disclose knowledge and beliefs.

## Identified position

An identified position requires a demonstrated knowledge and understanding of Victorian Aboriginal Community, society and culture, as well as the issues impacting on it. Identified positions require a demonstrated ability to communicate sensitively and effectively with Aboriginal Communities. You can fill an identified with any applicant, though you must preference Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander applicants.

## Lateral violence

Lateral violence is a product of historical, cultural and social dynamics that results in a spectrum of behaviours that include: gossiping, jealousy, bullying, shaming, social exclusion, family feuding, organisational conflict and physical violence. Lateral violence can impact Aboriginal employees when their Community holds them accountable for the actions of their workplace or employer. Aboriginal employees may work and live in the same Community and so the lateral violence extends from their work life to their personal life.

## Racism

Racism is a belief that a particular race or ethnicity is inferior or superior to others. Racism may take the form of stereotyping, name calling or insults, negative commentary in the media, speeches at public assemblies, property damage or abuse on the internet. Racism can also take the form of excluding people from accessing services (directly or indirectly), employment, education or sporting activities. Racism can occur systematically, as the result of policies, conditions and practices that affect a broad group of people.<sup>4</sup>



## Self-determination

Self-determination means Aboriginal people being able to make their own choices and live according to their own values and beliefs.

## Traditional Owners

Traditional Owners are Aboriginal people who hold traditional rights and interests over particular Country.

## Treaty

A treaty is an agreement between states, nations or governments. The Victorian Government is in the process of negotiating a treaty or treaties with Aboriginal Victorians. See more at [Victorian Treaty](#), which describes ‘What is a Treaty’:

## Useful links and other information

- (1) [Creative Spirits: How to name Aboriginal people?](#)
- (2) [6 Different Types of Abuse - REACH](#)
- (3) Williams, R. (2008), Cultural safety; what does it mean for our work practice? Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health, 23(2):213-214.
- (4) Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, Racism: definition, research and laws.