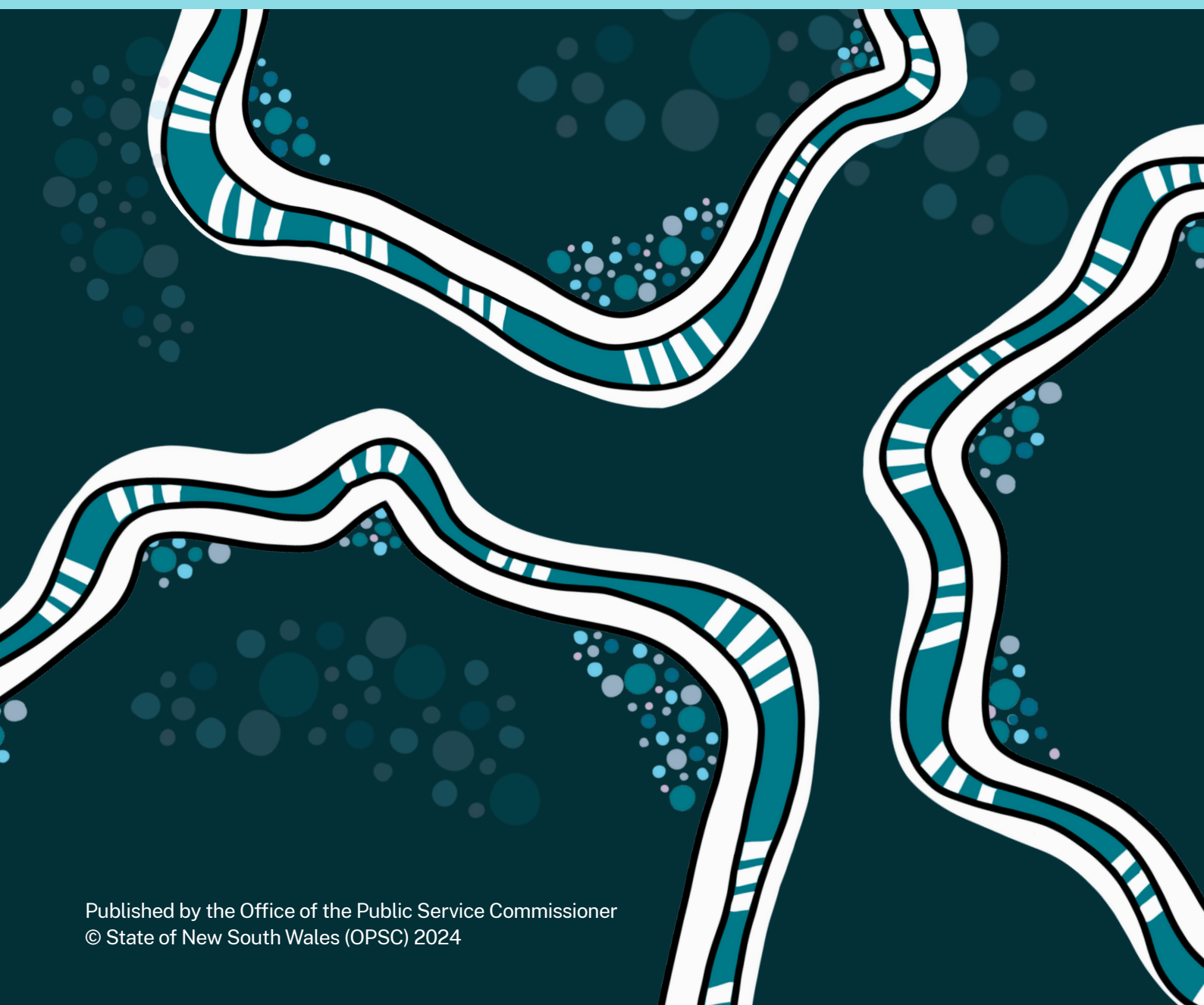


Career Advancement Guide

For NSW Public Sector Aboriginal and Torres Strait
Islander Senior Executives



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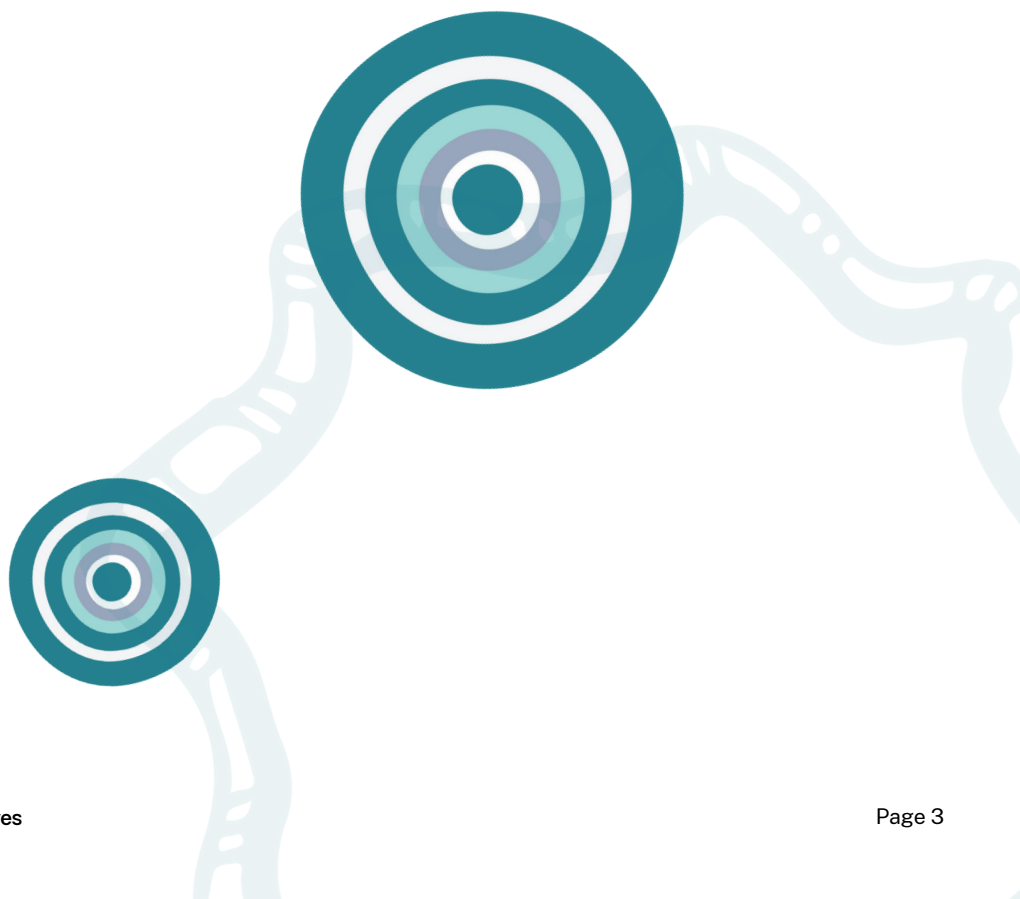
This document can be accessed online at: www.psc.nsw.gov.au.

Acknowledgement of Country

We respectfully acknowledge the traditional custodians of Country across NSW. We acknowledge the spiritual connections and relationships that traditional custodians have continued to maintain and strengthen since time began, which will continue well into the future.

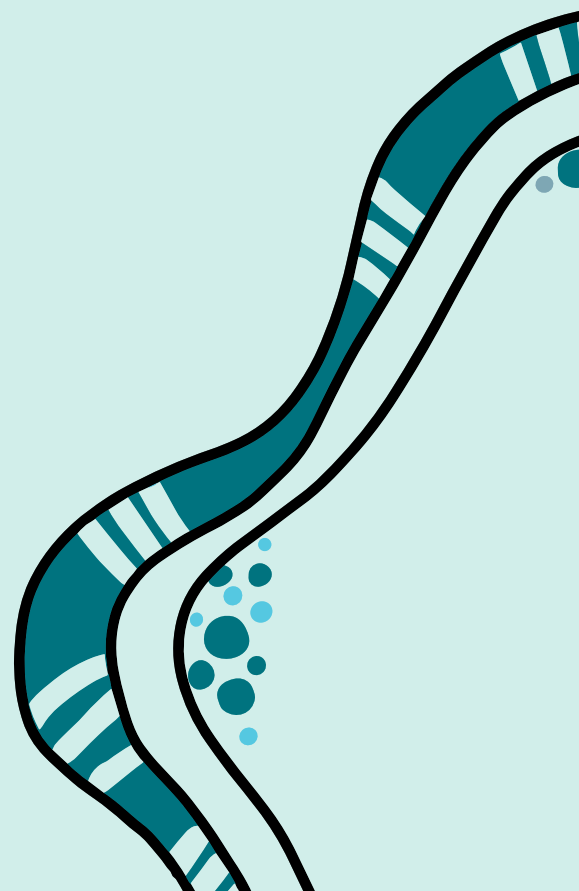
We pay our respects to Elders gone before us, those who present before us, and those who are emerging. We recognise their cultural knowledge and wisdom has been passed down through generations and will remain present through stories and song-lines for generations to come.

We extend this respect and acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across the public sector, recognising their skills and experiences in supporting the people of NSW.



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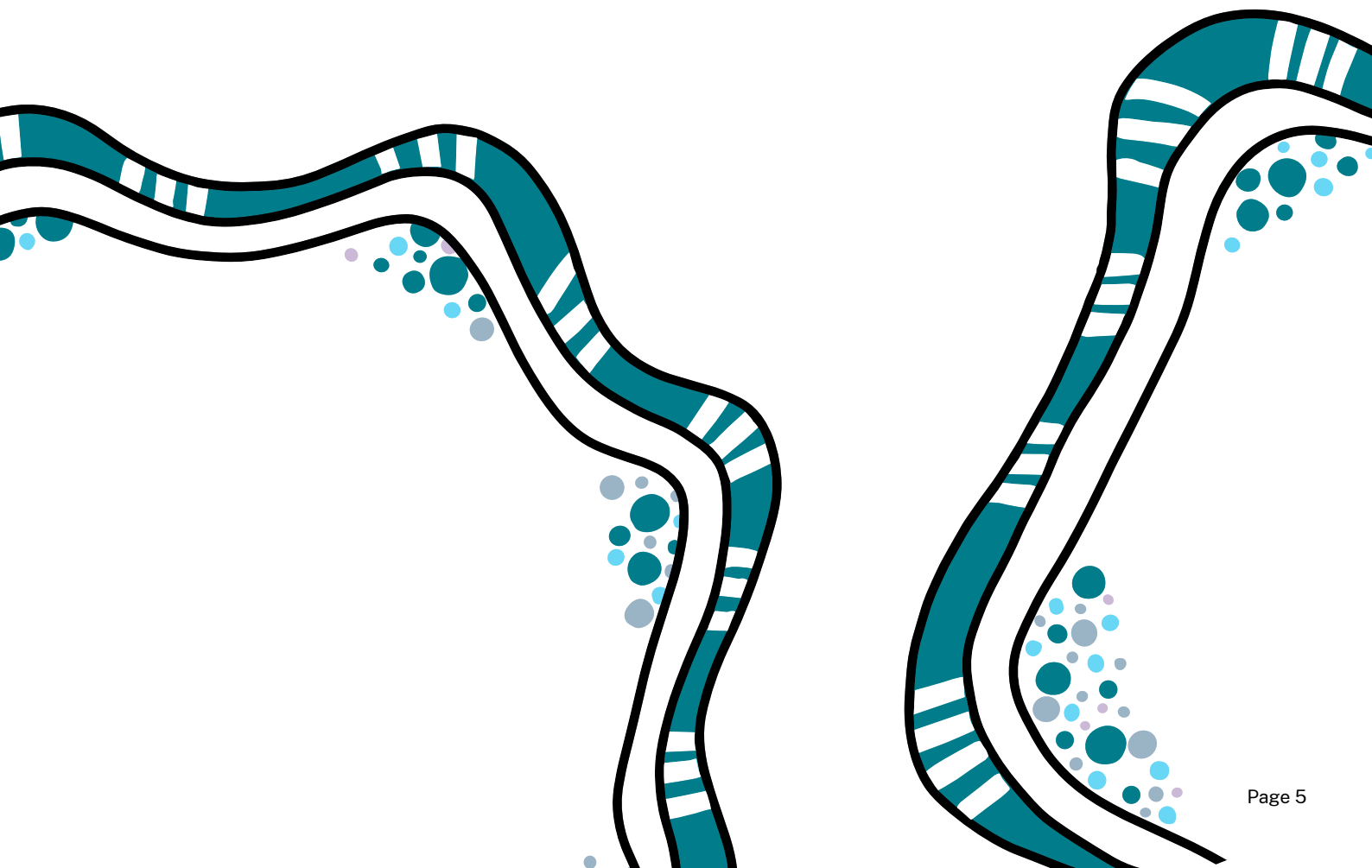
Message from the Commissioner

The NSW Public Sector is committed to advancing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation within the NSW Public Sector at the senior executive level. This is important because, to be effective and best serve our customers, the public service should reflect our community.

The NSW public sector needs to lead by example, to pave the way for future generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders, and to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior executive voices are not just heard but elevated across our organisations.

We know that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior executives increase the cultural capability and safety of our organisations. We value the cultural strengths and wealth of life experiences, knowledge and skills Aboriginal senior executives bring to the NSW Public Sector. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior executives culturally, and also fundamentally, strengthen our capacity to serve our communities with empathy, respect, and integrity. Your insights, perspectives, and experiences are invaluable assets that we must cherish and harness to drive meaningful change.

Kathrina Lo
NSW Public Service Commissioner
July 2024



Introduction

Significant progress has been made to increase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in senior executive roles with over 170 public sector senior executives identifying as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander in 2023.¹

Senior leaders is a broader group than senior executives and includes people in other senior leadership roles such as school principals.² This guide will use Aboriginal senior executives throughout to refer to both senior leaders and senior executives.

Despite the increase in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior executives at Band 1 senior executive and above, in 2023 there were only 20 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the senior executive Band 2 or above roles.³ The next challenge is to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees are equally represented across all senior executive bands.

Purpose of the guide

The Career Advancement Guide for NSW Public Sector Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Senior Executives (the Guide) seeks to support the progress of existing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders into more senior executive leadership roles by providing practical tips, resources and advice. It aims to challenge conventional thinking on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander career development and provides practical solutions through the lived experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior executive leaders and truth telling.

The Guide has been informed by analysing current research and investigations into the barriers and enablers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employee career progression, as well as interviews with current and former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander NSW public service senior executives. The Guide is supported by existing research, policies and guides developed by the Office of the Public Service Commissioner (OPSC).

The Guide is complemented by the 'Championing Aboriginal Senior Executive Leadership: A Guide for Allies and Sponsors in the NSW Public Sector', which aims to empower non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior executives to support the career aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders in the sector.

This guide is not intended to replace agency career development support but rather complement it. We recommend you continue to access career development programs and initiatives while utilising the insights offered in this guide to further your career progression.

How to use the guide

It is recommended that you work through this document chronologically, as each chapter builds upon the previous one. There is no assumed knowledge or prior reading needed. The guide is intended to challenge you and prompt action with reflective questions included in each chapter.

Upon completion of the guide, you should:

- understand the NSW Public Sector Leadership Framework
- be able to harness cultural knowledge to support career progression
- know your brand and the power of sharing your values, stories, and experiences with others
- feel confident responding to issues of cultural load, racism, and cultural safety
- know how to advocate for opportunities to gain the skills and experiences you need to advance
- understand the benefit of having a sponsor and how to get one
- know the strength of lateral care and how this can be drawn from your network and role models
- have additional resources and action plans to advance your career.

How the guide was informed

This Guide was developed through research, benchmarking from other Australian jurisdictions, one on one conversations with senior executives (both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) across the sector and evolving content development workshops with the Office of the Public Service Commissioner (OPSC).

Thirriwirri led the development of this guide and is a 100% Aboriginal owned and led consultancy business that includes many former NSW Public Sector Aboriginal senior executives.

The NSW Public Sector Leadership Framework

The NSW Public Sector Leadership Framework supports leaders to develop the attributes, mindsets and behaviours necessary to make a positive impact for the people of NSW. The framework complements the NSW Public Sector Capability Framework and supports leaders to operate effectively in the five leadership impact areas: People, Results, Systems, Culture and Public value.



The NSW Public Sector Leadership Framework suggests the following 12 attitudes, mindsets and behaviours:

Attributes	Mindsets and behaviours
Strategic	Think in a community centric way, show organisational awareness, drive and motivation in the public interest, identify opportunities, focus on goals and prioritise work for greatest impact.
Collaborative	Value advice, teamwork, input and contributions of others, encourage people to work together, establish networks and think of the whole 'system'.
Accountable	Take responsibility for my own performance, initiative, actions, impact on others and team performance, and encourage this in others.
Authentic	Communicate honestly and openly, maintain integrity, express my views and align intent with impact, and apply the highest standards of ethical behaviour.
Courageous	Invite challenge, encourage genuine debate, problem solving, am able to make difficult decisions, undertake risk assessments and support these with mitigation strategies followed by bold actions.
Innovative	Look for possibilities and opportunities for creative solutions, challenge the status quo, show curiosity and openness to new ideas, and think outside the box. Leverage technologically-enabled approaches (data and digital).
Inspiring	Engage and motivate others in working towards a common vision.
Inclusive	Seek, respect and leverage the perspectives and experiences of diverse backgrounds. Create a psychologically and culturally safe environment.
Empathetic	Understand the needs, motivations and emotions of others and treat people with respect and consideration.
Resilient	Maintain calmness and persistence in the face of challenge or adversity, with a focus on self and team wellbeing.
Adaptable	Embrace change and flexibility, demonstrate comfort with ambiguity and complexity, and support others through transition.
Growth mindset	Commit to life-long learning and personal growth, develop self-awareness, and be proactive in seeking improvement and feedback.

Modelling these attributes, mindsets and behaviours will set you, your teams and organisation up for success.

As Aboriginal senior executives, you will likely draw strengths from your cultural knowledge and identity in addition to this framework.

Knowing yourself

Culture as a superpower

Cultural knowledge can be a powerful tool in career progression if you can harness it. For Aboriginal senior executives, applying a cultural lens to mainstream policies, programs and processes comes naturally. Providing valuable cultural insights into a piece of work can open doors and contribute to decision-making and initiatives.

Non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior executive employees interviewed while developing this Guide referenced the benefits of having Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees in 'mainstream' roles. While the interviewed cohort does not necessarily reflect the broader sector, it does reinforce that culture is seen as an asset. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior executives said they were able to capitalise on opportunities because of their cultural knowledge. They were able to access people, conversations and 'get a seat at the table' that were 'above their grade' because the valuable contribution of their cultural skills and insights were recognised.

“For Aboriginal leaders, the social and moral obligation that comes with community leadership is life-long. Those who lead, who have authority, must care for and look after those who come behind.”

Former Senator Patrick Dodson

Your brand

Take control of your brand

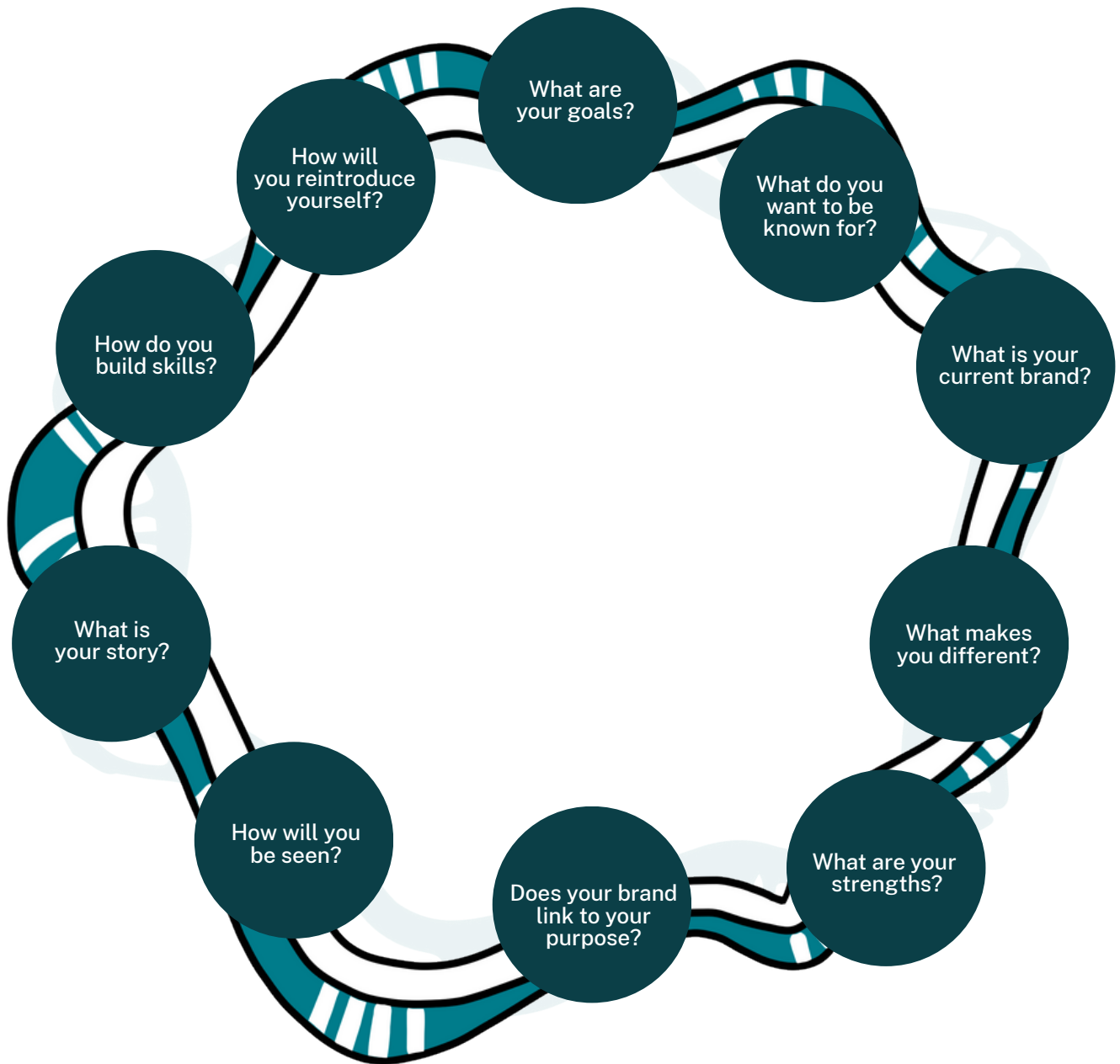
The idea of having a professional brand sits awkwardly with many. It is important to remember that a professional brand is a leadership norm and you have one, regardless of whether or not you choose to take control of it. It is important to get comfortable with the concept and develop and use it in a way that works for you. Understanding your brand will help determine future career opportunities, identify opportunities for development and even help you find a sponsor. ⁴

As a first step, consider the 'steps to build your brand' activity. Your answers can form part of a coaching conversation, your Professional Development Plan (PDP) or regular 1:1 with your supervisor. Consider asking them:

- what they believe your strengths are
- what skills or experiences you are missing
- whether you are demonstrating your values.

Test your self-perceived strengths with them. [PWC's Personal Brand book](#) has more of these questions and reflections.

Activity: Steps to build your brand



For many senior executives, their story, whether career or personal, forms a key component of their brand. No two backgrounds are the same. While there is no obligation to share personal stories if you do not feel comfortable doing so, being confident and open to share your story can be a powerful tool in connecting with others and supporting emerging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders.



Chapter reflective questions

- Reflect on your cultural knowledge and consider the cultural strengths you can apply in your role.
- How would you describe your leadership brand?
- How can you bridge any gaps between your view of your brand, and others' view of your brand?

Aboriginal Senior Leadership

Career story

Famey Williams

Githabul woman and Chief Executive of the Aboriginal Housing Office

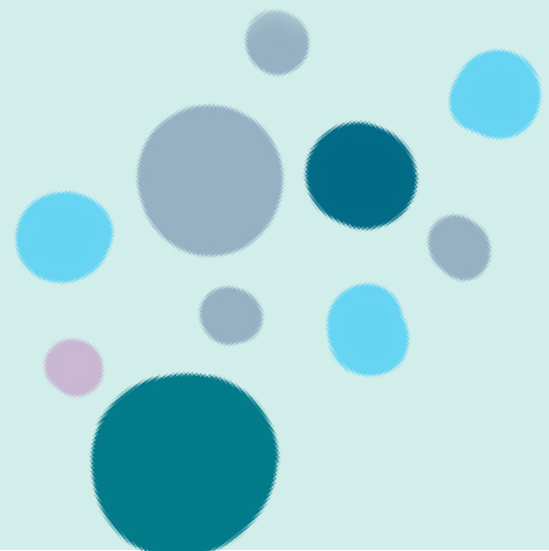


Until 30 years of age I would class my career as stepping tentatively, lots of mistakes, confusion and not very sure of myself. I had a lot of mental baggage that I had to undo before I was able to really put the strides in seriously for my career. Before that, I knew I wanted something more, but I was really clueless and insecure in my ability.

The main things I have drawn upon that have helped me achieve what I have today are a combination of things; higher education, formal mentoring and coaching, great support in my personal life, and always challenging myself to do more, to be more. I am never settling and thinking I've got it in the bag, and I always look for ways to increase my knowledge every year. I've made a number of strategic decisions regarding my career and have stuck with my gut. I knew I never wanted to fit some other traditional mould. If I was going to be a leader, I wanted to be authentic to myself and my community.

If you are wondering about the strategic decisions I made, many revolved around pushing myself into roles that weren't necessarily my cup of tea, however, I knew that would boost my skillset like no other. These were things such as working on a government reform, working as an Executive Officer, secondments to advisor roles, and acting in as many senior roles as I could do flesh out my understanding of how to operate at senior levels. I also spent time unpacking what is my leadership style and what can I bring personally to a role that sets me apart. I don't want a role that I am not the right fit for, so it's in the best interest of whoever is hiring me to know exactly who I am and what my leadership vision is.

Good leadership is knowing you have to draw on the strength of others (you'll never know everything), find your 'people' as they'll lift you up when you feel like giving in (and that will happen a lot), and build respectful and kind relationships (you will always run into people again and again, so don't burn your bridges), and most importantly, deliver!



Explore the opportunities and connect

Create your own 'Board of Directors'

A 'Board of Directors' is one way to expand your thinking on, and draw support around, your career development. A Board of Directors is a group of trusted peers, mentors or leaders who can provide advice, guidance, and opportunities. Members are usually outside of your direct reporting line.

Members can be:

- internal to the sector or outside the sector
- subject matter experts
- industry experts
- someone who is adept in a particular skill such as influencing
- someone who has a strong network
- someone you admire.

It is important to have a diversity of views and experiences. If you do not have a direct connection to someone you wish to be on your Board, ask a peer or manager to facilitate one. Scheduling conversations with your Board of Directors regularly will help you maintain connections, receive valuable insights, and allow you to ask strategic questions. It may also keep you front of mind for upcoming opportunities.

Create your 'Board of Directors'⁵

- Each director should have a speciality.
- Consider your strengths, development needs and goals. What do you need to move from where you are to where you want to be?
- Reach out to individuals from different backgrounds, industries, roles, and organisations who can help you broaden your perspective, teach you new ways of doing things and expand your network.
- Your Board can be as formal or as casual as you like.
- Nurture your network with meaningful conversations and interactions.

"As Aboriginal people, we have always retained our resilience, our humour and our cultural integrity."

Ken Wyatt

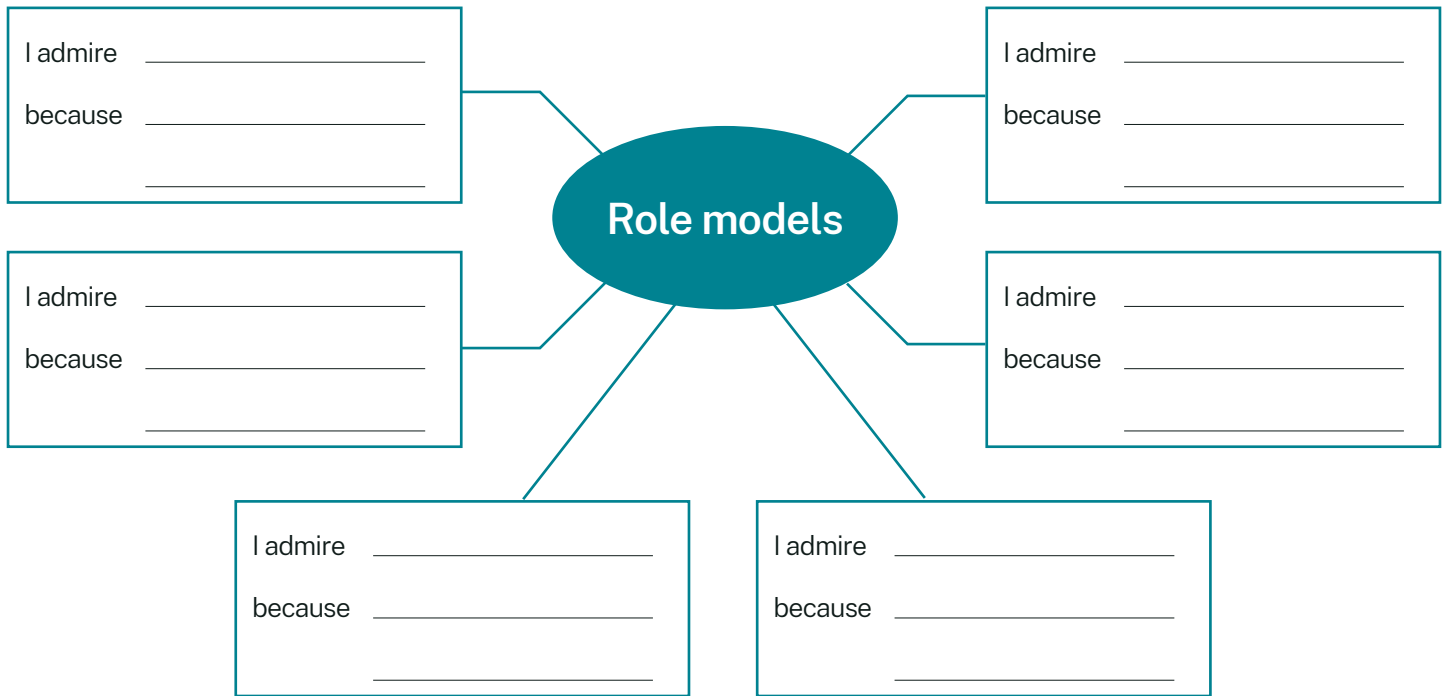
Role models and lateral care

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior executive employees have indicated that the lack of Band 2 (and above) Aboriginal role models is discouraging. While having visible Aboriginal representation in the upper levels of senior executives is helpful, non-Aboriginal role models and allies are available and can be useful when considering senior 'mainstream' roles. You may also find a role model or mentor outside the sector.

The OPSC's Aboriginal Senior Leaders forums provide a safe space to network with peers, share information and celebrate success. You could also research Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with interesting career journeys and ask them to connect or ask your

peers about potential connections. LinkedIn has several communities of practice and subject matter experts. The Aboriginal senior executives interviewed for this guide expressed a genuine openness to connecting and supporting emerging talent.

- Consider who you admire and why.
- Reach out to them and ask to connect.
- Ask to hear their career story and share yours.



Sponsorship

“Sponsorship is the active and considered use of personal influence, professional standing, connections and networks to enhance career opportunities and help clear pathways for others.”⁶ It is different to mentoring because no formal process or arrangement is required.

Aboriginal senior executives cited sponsorship as one of the most useful tools for career advancement, more so than formal mentoring programs. Being part of conversations, decision-making processes and having ‘a seat at the table’ were considered invaluable to developing an understanding and strategic view of the organisation.

Band 2 and above employees are expected to have a solid understanding of the way government works, including budget, Cabinet and parliamentary processes. A sponsor can provide opportunities to develop your understanding of these through shadowing, acting opportunities or exposure to more senior-level meetings.

To make the most out of having a sponsor, you first need to understand your expertise, capabilities and your goals to enable your sponsors to identify relevant opportunities.

Consider potential sponsors who have had a career path or demonstrated a leadership style that you admire, rather than what position they currently hold. Reflect on what you can bring to the relationship. Remember, sponsorship should develop naturally, and this can take time. If you feel comfortable, you can ask your supervisor to help connect you to a sponsor.

Forums I'd like to attend:

To join or learn more about the OPSC’s Aboriginal Senior Leaders forums, [please email us](#).

Potential sponsors:

“Moving from Band 1 to Band 2 and 3 requires three things – a champion, opportunity and capability.”
Janet Schorer – NSW TAFE

Resources

[Your Next Move Podcast: EP35 ‘The 4 Key Relationships and How to identify Mentors and Sponsors in the Workplace’](#)

[TED: ‘How to find the person who can help you get ahead at work’ – Carla Harris](#)

Coaching

Research from the Executive Central Knowledge Centre has found that 70 percent of coaching recipients saw an increase in their work performance and 80 percent are more confident because of their coaching relationship.



Coaching is different to mentoring and sponsorship. It aims to strengthen performance by giving confidential and personal insights to participants. A coach can facilitate sponsorship, completion of a career map, and provide advice on how to reframe skills and experiences to fit your future career ambitions. Senior executives referenced the benefit of having a coach encouraging them to make time to consider their professional development and future direction when this may have otherwise been a low priority.

The easiest way to access a coach is by making a request through your PDP process. There are an increasing number of qualified Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander coaches available. You should consider if you would prefer an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander coach. While there can be great value from a professional coach, there are people within your network who could provide a similar perspective through a coaching conversation. This could include your supervisor, mentor, a sponsor or someone on your Board of Directors.

“A coach is someone who tells you what you don’t want to hear, who has you see what you don’t want to see, so you can be who you have always known you could be.”

Tom Landry

Consider the networks that you could access and write them down.

Online communities: _____

Departmental networks: _____

Sector networks: _____

Personal networks: _____

Subject matter networks: _____



Chapter reflective questions

- Who are your career role models and why?
- Who could sit on your Board of Directors?
- What networking opportunities are you leveraging and how could you develop these further?
- How can you reach out to people you admire and ask to connect?
- What forums or experiences do you want to access and how do they benefit your career?
- What value could a coach provide to you? If you can’t access a professional coach, who else could fulfil this role?

Career planning

Understanding your strengths

If you have historically worked in identified roles or roles specifically focused on Aboriginal policy, programs or services, it can be daunting to consider the next step in your career and how your skills can be transferred to generalist or mainstream roles.

If you do not know where you want your career to go, an excellent starting point is reflecting on your strengths, interests and career aspirations. Understanding your strengths can help unlock your potential and enhance your performance.

The OPSC has a range of career progression frameworks and tools that can support you to guide your career progression including:

- [NSW Public Sector Capability Framework](#) which can be used to guide your career progression and help you to take the next step in your career.
- [Capability Discovery Tool](#) which you can use to reflect on the capabilities to meet the requirements of your aspiration role.
- Your Board of Directors is a great resource to start the conversation as they can provide impartial third-party feedback.
- [I Work for NSW](#) to search for roles and understand the capability levels required in roles like those that you aspire to.
- [Executive sector role descriptions](#) that outline the work level standards and the capabilities that are required at each level.
- You can also talk to your manager or HR team for support or resources.

Activity:

Do not hesitate to re-think your career aspirations. What are your career ambitions and how do they align with your purpose? What brings you enjoyment? What are you willing to sacrifice and what are your career non-negotiables? What have previous roles taught you about your strengths and areas for development?

Consider gaining generalist experience

You will likely need to work in non-identified positions, or in roles without an Aboriginal specific focus, if you want to progress into upper senior executive levels. Most current Aboriginal leaders interviewed for this guide have moved between identified and mainstream roles in their career.

Aboriginal senior executives sitting on recruitment panels for senior roles have observed that successful applicants are often able to demonstrate experience operating at the level of the role they are competing for, usually through acting opportunities. A common theme from Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal executives was that Aboriginal applicants tended to have a lack of exposure to, or experience in, broader government processes, such as experience in organisational change, budget and Cabinet processes, ministerial engagement and risk management. This is often achieved by working in mainstream roles, and by undertaking acting or temporary assignments.

If you are in an identified role, consider applying for non-identified roles to help you gain exposure to different facets of the sector. Actively seeking temporary opportunities at Band 2 and above will signal your interest in career development and help you secure an ongoing role in upper senior executive.

You can find available roles on [I work for NSW](#).

Map your career

A career map is a helpful tool to outline where you are in your career, where you want to be and how to get there. It provides a framework to help you plan and guide your own career by reflecting on your strengths, goals and opportunities for development. While a career map can be done with a supervisor, it is a highly personal document that may be better suited to a trusted advisor or coach.

Start by completing your career map and gaps or opportunities for development will become apparent, by the completion you should have a clear focus of what actions you need to take.



Career conversations

Career conversations between senior executives and Aboriginal senior executives are powerful because they provide a dedicated space for individuals to reflect on their professional journey, set goals, receive guidance and align their aspirations with organisational objectives.

Initiate, be prepared and anticipate the career conversation with your manager. It will allow you to be clear and work together about the support and opportunities you need to achieve your goals.

Seek feedback from your manager to understand your development needs. Discuss experiences, exposure and training available in your current role that will allow you to develop the knowledge, experience and capability requirements of your aspired roles.

Identify opportunities that support your ongoing learning and capability development through the 70-20-10 learning model – 70% on the job learning, 20% peer learning and 10% formal training.

Some career conversation preparation points could include:

- reflect on your focus for the next 12 months and consider how your manager and the organisation can support you in achieving them
- reflect on the 70-20-10 learning model and the learning and capabilities you would like to develop further to advance in your career
- reflect on your professional journey so far and identify any barriers or challenges you've faced that you can share with your manager to address them together
- share the support or resources you need to thrive in your current role and beyond
- consider what opportunities you see for yourself within the organisation or sector
- consider how to balance your cultural identity with your professional responsibilities, and how the organisation can better support this balance.

Leadership challenges

The following table identifies six core challenges that leaders may face. It also provides ideas on how these challenges might be addressed.

	Band 1	Band 2	Band 3	Band 4
1. Public Expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-develop strategies and experiences that consider diverse citizen needs. • Provide the public with rich, realtime and easy-to-use functions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Address diversity and equity barriers when engaging with communities. • Build trust with the community to co-design with them. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop internal capability of customer centricity e.g. User-experience. • Expectation of integrated services. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-ordinate and support co-delivery with the public. • Enable co-design with communities. • Expectation of integrated and seamless services.
2. Authorising Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have a whole of system focus. • Integrate policy and execution. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have a whole-of-system focus. • Integrate policy and execution. • Maintain urgency and pace to deliver. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balance micro and macro issues. • Maintain urgency and pace to deliver. • Stewardship in the changing environment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stewardship in the changing environment.
3. Our People	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access appropriate talent and skills in a flexible and dynamic way. • Harness and sustain teams. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access appropriate talent and skills in a flexible and dynamic way. • Manage a changing workforce including augmented workers, virtual teams and other workers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expand talent networks and create flexible workforces to continue to deliver results. • Optimise workforce for flexible workforce arrangements. • Pioneer new processes to manage a changing workforce. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design, plan and optimise workforce processes and ecosystems for flexible workforce arrangements and new talent networks. • Reinvent worker roles and support the change to allow for flexible workforces and utilising of technology.
4. Collaboration across boundaries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Address the impact of bias. • Solicit support for their leadership to challenge entrenched practices. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure inclusivity and diversity in collaboration. • Overcome silos. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design and delivery in a shared accountability environment. • Facilitators of collaboration and delivery across the system. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Define and agree upon accountability and governance within shared delivery models. • Facilitators of collaboration and delivery across the system. • Teaming at Executive Leadership level.
5. Delivering Business Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balance day to day compliance with more strategic risk management. • Leverage digital and evolving technologies. • Obtain budget to facilitate change and key initiatives. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balance innovation, delivery and governance in a time pressured environment. • Support the use of digital and evolving technologies. • Solicit support for their leadership to challenge entrenched practices. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drive the use of digital and evolving technologies. • Organise, operate, and deliver services in new ways. • Simultaneously deliver now while designing for the future. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create opportunities to leverage digital and evolving technologies. • Design and delivery sustainable services and systems. • Simplify complexity.
6. Individual Experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Step out to challenge the status quo at personal risk. • Transition from manager or technical expert to executive leaders. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Step out to challenge the status quo at personal risk. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deal with ethical decisions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deal with ethical decisions. • Lead with authenticity to engage with hearts and minds rather than reliance on positional, authority.

Reflective questions

- How can you increase your understanding of the six core challenges impacting the sector to inform your decision-making process?
- Reflect on your current leadership approach and plan how you ascend through different executive bands and challenges?

Plan and search for opportunities

Once you have an idea of where you want your career to go and have asked for your manager's support, you will need to find opportunities.

Some tips to find opportunities include:

- visit the [I work for NSW website](#) or download the [I work for NSW app](#) where you can search for jobs by keyword search, location, salary range, specific NSW Agencies and other filters, save your favourite searches, view full job descriptions and complete applications
- keep an eye on job market trends
- ask your manager, network and Board of Directors to keep an eye out for the types of roles you would be open to.

Applying for roles

Aboriginal senior executive employees reported a lack of appreciation and understanding of their skills from community leadership roles, and their relevance to the jobs they applied to.

Aboriginal culture and communities are complex. Experience delivering results in these contexts can make you an even stronger applicant, but you will need to demonstrate this in the application and interview process. Be sure to step out the nuances and complexities of community based or culturally focused examples. Do not underestimate the transferability of your skills to a mainstream role.

While you should showcase your successes, try to focus your responses on demonstrating capability at the desired level. Your Board of Directors, supervisor or coach can help you understand your capabilities, transferable skills, and examples that are relevant for an interview panel.

To help you prepare, speak to the key contact for the role before you apply, and ask detailed questions about the role such as:

- What are the key deliverables for the first 6-12 months?
- What does success look like?

You can use the [Capability Application Tool](#) to help apply and prepare for interviews in the NSW public sector. You can also refer to the [NSW Public Sector Capability Framework](#) for practice application and interview questions based on the focus capabilities listed in the role description. The practice questions help you to link your skills and experience with the focus capabilities in the role description.

Tips:

- The focus capabilities outline the key accountabilities of a role. It is important to focus on preparing interview responses to these capabilities.
- Use the language in the behavioural indicators to prepare interview responses.
- The example interview questions can be used to practice answers that showcase work you have done and how you did it.

Regardless of the outcome from a recruitment activity, proactively seek specific, actionable feedback. When unsuccessful, Aboriginal employees interviewed reflected on being told that they were not 'operating at that level yet'. When this happens, it is important to seek concrete examples to support the statement.



Chapter reflective questions

- Consider your career non-negotiables. What, if any, contact do you want with culture and Community?
- How can you connect with your networks about career opportunities?
- How can you transfer your skills and experiences to a mainstream roles?
- What levels of experience are missing from your career and how can you gain these?
- What are your strengths and how can you transfer your skills and experience to demonstrate Band 2 or above capability?

Managing cultural load and cultural safety

Managing cultural load

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees interviewed for this guide revealed that they continue to be asked to provide cultural knowledge, even when working in a 'mainstream' role. Research shows that cultural load is a barrier to progression.

While more cultural awareness among supervisors and peers can ease the burden, it is unlikely to fully overcome the burden of workplace cultural load.⁷

Strong advice from Aboriginal senior executives is to not be afraid to say no when asked to contribute to a cultural task or issue that is outside of your role. Ideally, an inclusive and culturally competent manager would be receptive to this conversation but if not, you should find an ally or sponsor who can help to take action to share awareness and understanding.

Accessing a supportive network, such as the PSC's Aboriginal Senior Leaders forums, can be a source of resilience.

“Cultural load is the (often invisible) additional workload borne by Aboriginal people in the workplace, ... This includes, extra Aboriginal-related work demands that non-Aboriginal colleagues do not have, expectations to educate non-Aboriginal colleagues about Aboriginal people ... and expectations to talk on behalf of all Aboriginal people.”

(DCA/Jumbunna, 2020)

Lateral care

Aboriginal senior executives interviewed who moved into mainstream roles reported lateral violence and backlash from Aboriginal peers and community members who suggested they were betraying their Aboriginality through progression. Lateral violence, as defined by SafeWork NSW, involves a collective effort by individuals to attack or undermine others.⁸ This behaviour, though not exclusive to Aboriginal communities, is particularly impactful due to the sense of powerlessness resulting from cultural oppression and colonialism. While such behaviours are encountered globally, their manifestation within Aboriginal communities is rooted in historical and systemic factors. It can be hard to believe in yourself when receiving pushback or criticism from community.

As Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees progress into Band 2 levels and above, their ability to influence and have a positive impact on community can increase with the scope of their role, albeit perhaps in a less hands-on way. Focusing on the benefits, both personal and at a broader community level, can help you stay centred when faced with lateral violence or imposter syndrome.

If you experience lateral violence:

- address your concerns with the aggressor (if you feel safe enough)
- find out about the workplace policies about bullying, harassment and violence
- report the behaviour to your manager or a mature colleague
- keep a record of the negative behaviour
- seek external advice.⁹

Aboriginal senior executives frame it as “being grounded in purpose because purpose is greater than fear”. They suggest being clear about what you want to influence and aligning your ambitions to that. Ask yourself why you want a particular role and how it adds to your aspirations, your purpose or your career goals. Aboriginal leaders can take strength when their ambition helps mob and their leadership is role modelled for future generations.

Similarly, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior executives cite Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peers and culture as a source of strength and empowerment. Accessing formal and informal networking opportunities and building a culturally enabling environment has a positive influence on advancement. Sometimes that support is not apparent in the workplace but there are respected voices who will support you if you tap into them. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior executives have found strength in their culture and have used it as a resilience tool. Some find that they can be grounded and centred by spending time in Community, walking on Country, or speaking with Elders and other inspirational Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Cultural strengthening

The recognition and understanding of cultural safety has increased in recent years. However, 28% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees across Australia still feel their workplace is culturally unsafe.¹⁰ While it is not the responsibility of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees to uplift an organisation’s cultural safety, support can be drawn from senior Aboriginal leaders within the sector who can raise cultural safety to higher levels. If you need support, or tools for having a difficult conversation, reach out to your agency’s Human Resources (HR) team.

“Aboriginal senior leaders are in a better position to be able to call it out and support emerging leaders.”

Shane Hamilton, Head of Aboriginal Affairs 2023

The reality of racism

Racism is identified as a key issue for Aboriginal senior executives. Half of the Aboriginal senior executives interviewed for this guide shared that they experienced racism. In the 2023 People Matter Employee Survey, 14 percent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents indicated they had experienced racism or discrimination in the previous 12 months.¹¹ The ways in which this has played out varies but may include prejudices, biases, pigeonholing or misconceptions.¹² Research suggests that some Aboriginal public servants “may feel the need to ‘act white’ to be accepted,”¹³ which was reinforced by senior Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees during interviews.

Resources

[TED: How to weave a cultural legacy through storytelling –Cohen Bradley](#)



Strategies to tackle racism

The NSW public sector has several initiatives dedicated to eliminating racism in the workplace, but many Aboriginal senior executives spoke of experiencing casual or 'soft' racism rather than overt discrimination. Calling out these incidents can be more challenging than direct, overt racism particularly when there are power imbalances.

Aboriginal senior executives that took part in interviews had strategies, including calling it out, asking further questions to clarify their meaning, and seeking support from colleagues.

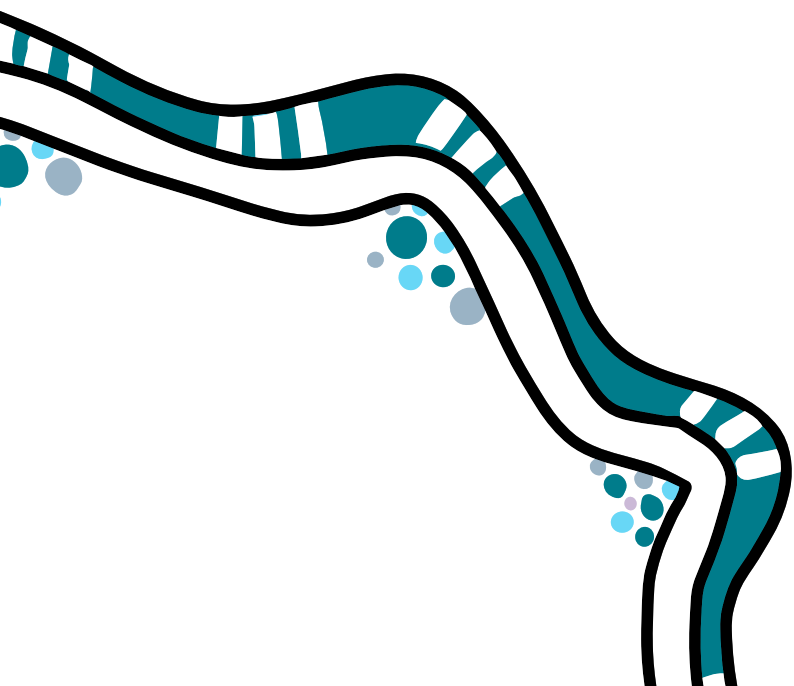


Chapter reflective questions

How can you establish boundaries on the scope of your role in providing cultural insights and information?

How can you connect with allies, your network or other support when needed?

There is no silver bullet for racism, and it is not the responsibility of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees to educate others or disprove stereotypes and assumptions. If you have or are experiencing racism, it is important to remember that you are not alone, and that support is available. Non-Aboriginal colleagues can help call out unacceptable behaviour and stereotypes and you can seek support from colleagues and networks. Your agency HR team can provide more formal support, resources and pathways.



Mindset, confidence and self-belief

Start with 'yes'

When new opportunities present themselves, think about starting with 'yes'. If a role, opportunity or challenge is presented to you, say yes even if it makes you uncomfortable. This approach can help overcome imposter syndrome and build confidence in areas you might find challenging, for example public speaking.

"Start with yes and then work out how to get it done."

Jason Ardler, former Head of Aboriginal Affairs 2023

Imposter syndrome

Imposter syndrome is common amongst all leaders. Aboriginal senior executives interviewed for this guide shared that they believe it impacts Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees more than others. Common themes they raised included feeling a need to prove that promotion was not racially motivated and to disprove stereotypes.

"65% of Aboriginal staff feel that they have to work harder than non-Aboriginal colleagues."¹⁴

What can you do about imposter syndrome?

1. Recognise when you fall into 'imposter thinking'. Self-awareness is key.

2. Remind yourself of your real achievements and skills. Write them down (to re-read and use for job applications).
3. Talk to others. Many people experience imposter syndrome and talking it out will make you feel better.
4. Use your support network to debrief about 'not so successful' days. You'll likely see that it wasn't as bad as you think.
5. Research imposter syndrome to understand it more. Knowledge is power.

Confidence

"The only person you should try to be better than, is the person you were yesterday."

Adam Goodes

Aboriginal senior executives feel that they need to prove themselves more than others. During interviews, many Aboriginal senior executives said they felt the need to justify their appointment and perform above their non-Aboriginal colleagues, often for fear of being labelled a 'token' hire.

Formal training was referenced by Aboriginal senior executives as being a key enabler, but for unexpected reasons. Being in a new cohort of colleagues gave them a new benchmark to compare their own knowledge and capability, particularly the transferability of culturally focused experience. It reinforced their knowledge and skillset in non-Aboriginal contexts and gave them access to new, unexpected sponsors. It also challenged them to consider roles or departments outside of their comfort zone.

Conclusion

The NSW public service is committed to empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people into Band 2 roles and beyond. Significant progress has been made to date but there is a recognition that there is more to be done. The sector needs to provide an enabling environment, opportunities, tools and resources; while Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior executives need to be ready and willing to take the leap.

Being successful in upper senior executive level roles is challenging for anyone, but it is recognised that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders can face additional, specific hurdles including cultural load, systemic racism and lateral violence. Despite this, Community and culture can be a source of strength and resilience, while career sponsors, allies and lateral care networks can help empower you through your career advancement. Many 'mainstream' career progression techniques and tools can support you with your career aspirations, and they can be used in culturally appropriate ways. Remember, career journeys are very personal, there is no one size fits all approach.



Chapter reflective questions

What can you do to reduce the impact of imposter syndrome?

How can you apply a start with 'yes' mindset?

What lateral care supports can you establish for yourself?



Further support

There are several internal and external support mechanisms available for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees.

Internal agency support:

Workplace employee assistance programs, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander EAP services.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Employee Networks and support.

External support services:

- **13YARN** – crisis support.
 - 13 9276
- **Link Up** – NSW Aboriginal referral and counselling service for Aboriginal people affected by past government policies.
 - 02 7227 1443
- **Healing Foundation** – national support service supporting Aboriginal people and communities affected by trauma.
 - 02 6272 7500
- **Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia** – national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander wellbeing and mental health care support services.
- **Beyond Blue** – social and emotional well-being support resources for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.
 - 1300 22 4636

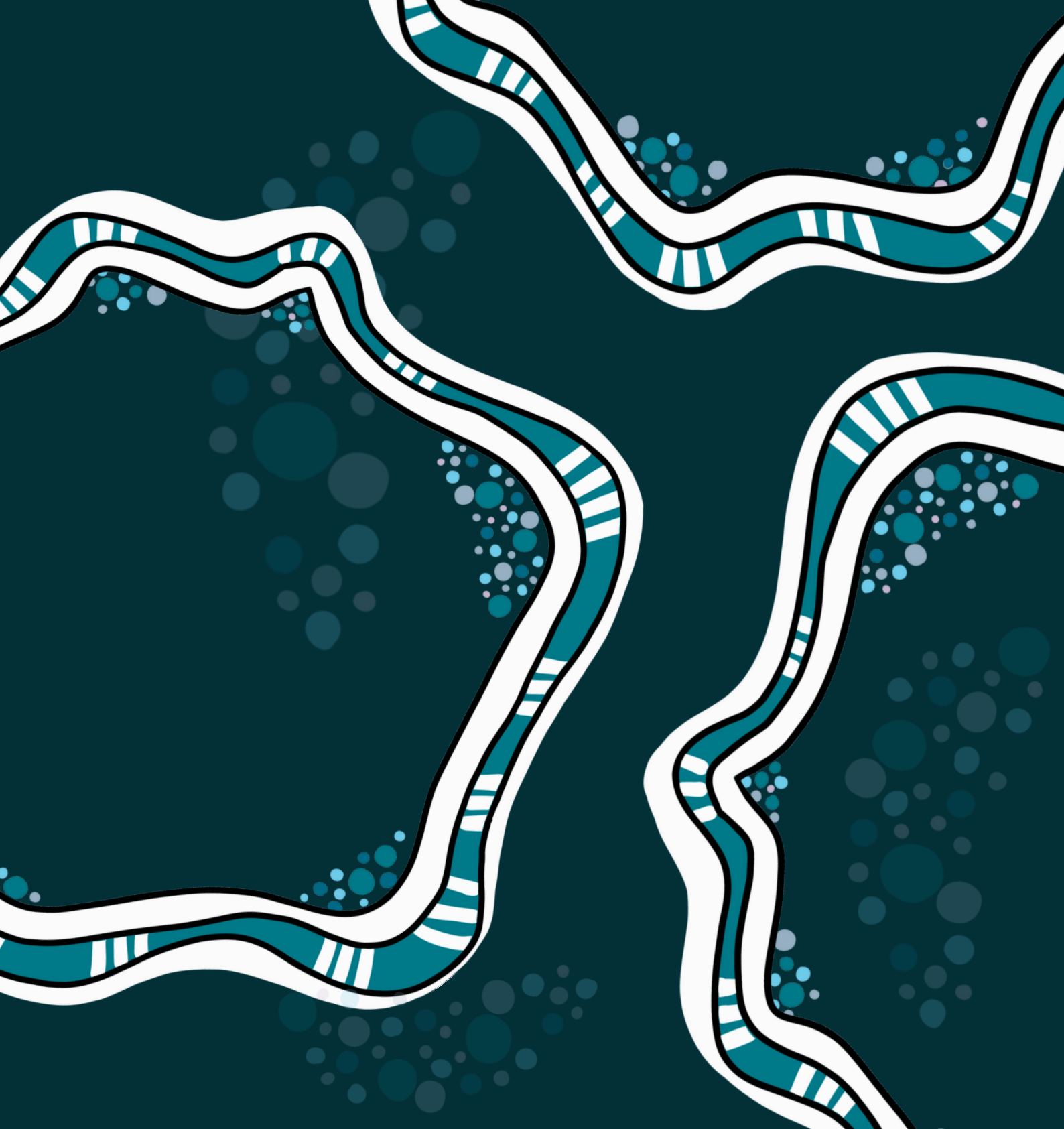
Additional resources

There are lots of great resources available to continue to build and these are just a few resources to consider.

- Visit the [NSW OPSC's website](#) for further guidelines and resources capability framework, performance development, leadership programs and framework.
- [Increasing cultural diversity in the NSW government sector senior executive cohort](#)
- [NSW OPSC Cultural Capability Guide](#)
- Australian Human Rights Commission, Racism. [It Stops With Me, Resource Hub](#)

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Career Advancement Guide

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Torres Strait Islander Senior Executives



Office of the Public Service Commissioner