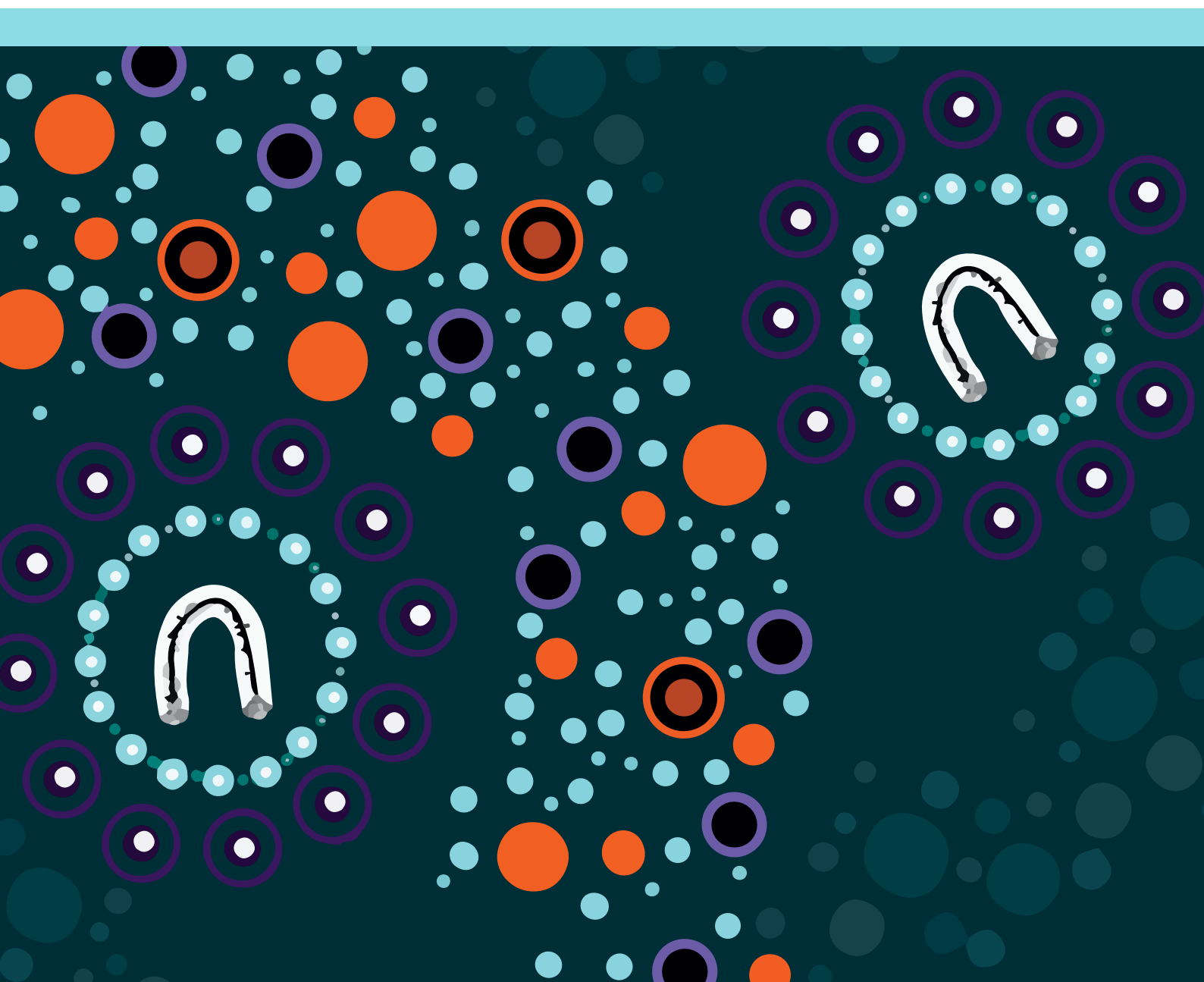


Championing Aboriginal Senior Leadership: Guide for Allies and Sponsors in the NSW Public Sector



This publication is intended for use by the NSW public sector. You may copy, distribute, display, download and otherwise freely deal with this publication for any purpose, provided that you attribute the Office of the Public Service Commissioner as the owner. You must obtain permission if you wish to charge others for access to the publication, include the publication in advertising or a product for sale, modify the publication, or republish the publication on a website. You may freely link to the publication on a Government agency website.

Disclaimer: While intended to be current and reflect best practice at the time of publication, this is not a comprehensive guide and may be or become incomplete, inaccurate, or out of date. This publication does not offer, constitute, or replace legal advice in relation to the management of issues discussed in this publication. The NSW Public Service Commission accepts no responsibility or liability in relation to this publication.

For more information about this guide, please contact:

Office of the Public Service Commissioner
Level 4, 255 George Street
Sydney NSW 2000
Australia
Telephone +61 2 9272 6000

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

Acknowledgment of Country

The Office of the Public Service Commissioner (OPSC) acknowledges and recognises Aboriginal people as the Traditional Custodians of the lands where we work and live. We celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their ongoing cultures and connections to the lands and waters of NSW. We pay our respects to Elders past, present, and emerging. We also acknowledge our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander colleagues at work.

Acknowledgment of lived experience

We would like to express our sincere gratitude and acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior executives for sharing their lived experiences and insights with us to inform and contribute to this guide. The voices of people with lived experience have been key in developing this guide.

Thirriwirri Pty Ltd

We acknowledge Thirriwirri Pty Ltd for their assistance in the development of this guide.

Aboriginal Workforce Inclusion Practitioners

We would like to acknowledge the Aboriginal Workforce Inclusion Champions Network for sharing their insights and practice to contribute to this guide and their ongoing work across the sector.

Contents

Message from the Commissioner	5
Introduction	6
Purpose of the guide	6
How to use the guide	6
How the guide was informed	6
The NSW Public Sector Leadership Framework	7
Key themes	8
Myth busting	9
Myth 1: Culture is a nice to have	9
Myth 2: Aboriginality is not a skill	9
Myth 3: Assessing merit means everyone should be treated the same	9
Myth 4: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people do not want to be leaders	10
Myth 5: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people only want to, or can only, work in Aboriginal roles	10
Myth 6: You cannot give Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees feedback	10
Myth 7: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people need special treatment	10
Enablers and actions to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior executives with career progression	11
Cultural safety	11
Cultural load	12
Cultural obligations	12
Recruitment	12
Unconscious bias	13
Pipeline and talent management	13
Identified and generalist roles	14
Career conversations	14
Support networking events and forums	15
Sponsorship	15
Practicing allyship	16
Conclusion	17
Additional resources	18
References	18

Message from the Commissioner

The NSW public sector is committed to increasing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce and the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior executives. Our commitment to increase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior executives in the workforce is not just a moral imperative, it is a strategic imperative. To be effective and best serve our customers, the public service should reflect our communities.

I have had the privilege of listening firsthand to the lived experience of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior executives. Their stories, their struggles, and their triumphs have deeply moved me. They have shared candidly about the barriers they have encountered – barriers that still loom large in their paths. From bearing the weight of cultural load, to navigating recruitment processes that often fall short of inclusivity, their journey is one marked by resilience in the face of adversity.

Your role is a key factor in creating inclusive and respectful workplaces that value the unique cultures and histories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We need your advocacy, leadership, sponsorship and allyship to pave the way for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander talent to ascend to the highest echelons of leadership.

Together, we can build a public service that not only reflects our community but embodies its spirit of diversity, equity and inclusion.

Kathrina Lo
NSW Public Service Commissioner
July 2024



Introduction

The [NSW Aboriginal Employment Strategy 2019-2025](#) outlines the commitment to increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior executives. Significant work has been done to support the sector to increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in senior leadership roles by 2025, with over 170 public sector senior leaders 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. 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, there were only 20 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the senior executive Band 2 or above roles in 2023. 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 *Championing Aboriginal Senior Executive Leadership: Guide for Allies and Sponsors in the NSW Public Sector* (the Guide) has been developed to facilitate current Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior executives to advance to Band 2 and above roles.

The aim of the Guide is to provide senior executives with practical tips on how to empower and support the career aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior executives.

This Guide aligns with the *Career Advancement Guide for NSW Public Sector Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Senior Executives* which is designed to assist existing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior

executives looking to progress their career into more senior positions.

This guide also aligns with the [Cultural Capability Guide](#) which supports you to shape an inclusive employee experience for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, from recruitment through to onboarding and employee experience within your agency. The guide considers cultural capability and inclusivity across all aspects of the employee lifecycle.

How to use the guide

This Guide will help you consider practical ways to support the career development of Aboriginal senior executives.

The Guide builds awareness of the challenges, systemic barriers and lived experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait people to support culturally capable engagement and to take action as an ally or sponsor.

You will find useful information to equip you in recruitment and career conversations and practicing visible leadership and allyship to pave the way for Aboriginal talent to ascend to the highest echelons of leadership.

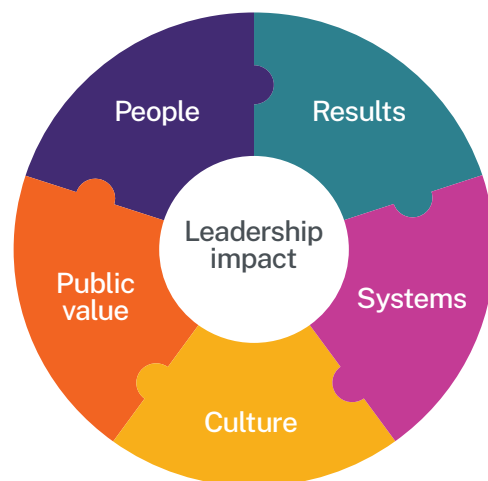
How the guide was informed

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

Thirriwirri have led development of this Guide and are a 100% Aboriginal owned and led consultancy business that includes many former NSW public sector Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 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 attitudes, mindsets and behaviours will set you and your organisation up for success.

“Moving from Band 1 to Band 2 and 3 requires 3 things – a champion, opportunity and capability.”

Janet Schorer – TAFE NSW

Key themes

Key themes identified by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior executives to help support career progression

Interviews with public sector senior executives showed that in terms of career progression, 80% of what works for all employees works for Aboriginal senior executives. The extra 20% is focused on the importance of:

- **sponsorship:** Having a champion who provides honest feedback and invests in capability development
- **exposure and experience:** Opportunities that built confidence, expand experience, test their capability, and exposes them to different types of roles and work
- **observational learning:** Being able to observe others to understand how they operated and made decisions.

Other factors that are critical to supporting progression shared by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander executives included:

1. **Senior executives must be culturally capable:** Senior executives need to be open to learning about cultural capability, being challenged and reflecting on what action is required.
2. **Psychological safety:** Senior executives should build trust and create psychologically safe workplaces for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to call out processes or practices that are not culturally safe. This will also require personal vulnerability and you need to be prepared to be told that you may have said or done the wrong thing.
3. **The capability framework should apply to**

everyone: Ensure that you are using the capability framework in the context of recruitment to undertake an assessment of your Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior executives and be willing to share feedback if necessary.

4. **Have career conversations:** Senior executives should have conversations to understand Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior executives career aspirations. Recognise that not everyone will have the same goals - with cultural reasons, or systemic or historical disadvantage possibly playing a part.
5. **Lean into people with potential:** Managers need to take responsibility for the professional development of their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees, which includes regular guidance, mentoring, teaching and exposure to all facets of leadership.
6. **Don't only give Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people the 'Aboriginal work':** Understand and respect the level of involvement individual Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees want to have in 'Aboriginal work', and do not box them in.
7. **Success can be isolating:** Support of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior executives needs to continue even after they have been appointed to a more senior role. It is important to ensure culturally relevant professional support is available for those who want it.

It was so important early in my executive career that I had leaders who understood my passion for Aboriginal outcomes right across government and involved me in their work in this space – even if it wasn't strictly in my position description. My lived experience was valued and supported.

Aboriginal senior executive

Myth busting

As leaders, you have a responsibility to understand and challenge the prevailing myths and misconceptions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that get in the way of supporting employees in the public service.

Myth 1: Culture is a nice to have

Fact: Culture is a strength, is important, and can provide a great source of resilience for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior executives. To leverage this in the workplace we need to remember that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees will have cultural and community commitments outside of work and will need time and space to fulfill these commitments in a different way to non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.²

Myth 2: Aboriginality is not a skill

Fact: There is confusion about identified and targeted roles that leads people to think that Aboriginality is a skill, rather than an identity.

An identified role is one in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity is a genuine occupational qualification and to which only Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may apply. Typically, such positions work directly with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and are involved in developing and/or providing services and programs which have an impact on and promote the welfare of the Aboriginal community.

A targeted role is a 'non-identified' or 'mainstream' role that can be filled using advertising and recruitment strategies that maximise applications from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. A person who does not identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander may apply for, and is eligible to be offered, a targeted role.

The crux of identified roles is that they not only require Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity but relevant and specific cultural knowledge and capability according to the role, which needs to be tested through an assessment and selection process. Being Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander does not equate to being an expert or even having experience in Aboriginal culture or community.

Resource: *'The Dreaming Path'* by Paul Callaghan with Uncle Paul Gordon

Myth 3: Assessing merit means everyone should be treated the same

Fact: Merit poses another problem in recruitment. While merit is crucial, it should not operate in isolation. Much has been written in recent times about the myth of merit (albeit in the context of gender) but the same fundamentals can be applied to other diversity groups.³ The ideology of meritocracy justifies the status quo, assuming that the right skills and effort is an equal playing field for all individuals and allow anyone to 'climb the social ladder'. Recognising the limitations of meritocracy prompts a holistic approach to recruitment, addressing barriers like biases and inequalities. Embracing diversity enriches teams and fosters inclusivity. Organisations should prioritise fairness and equity to create environments where everyone can thrive. Keep this in mind when short listing candidates and encourage your team to do the same.



Myth 4: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people do not want to be leaders

Fact: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are in leadership positions across all sectors but just like non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, not all aspire to more senior executive roles. Leadership in community, or cultural leadership, are esteemed positions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and many may choose to focus their ambitions here, rather than organisational leadership. Having an open conversation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees will help you understand their aspirations and how you can best support them.

Myth 5: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people only want to, or can only, work in Aboriginal roles

Fact: Not all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people only want to work in Aboriginal specific workstreams or within identified roles. There are a very limited number of identified roles at Band 2 and above. For those moving out of Aboriginal specific workstream roles, it is important that you help them understand how their skills and experiences are transferable. To do this, you may first need to consider and set aside your own perceptions that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specific career paths do not foster the same level of experience as 'mainstream' career paths, regardless of the breadth and complexity of specific roles.

This is also addressed in the Career Advancement Guide for NSW Public Sector Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Senior Executives.

“Don't only give Aboriginal people 'Aboriginal work' -don't box them in”.

Janet Schorer - TAFE NSW

Myth 6: You cannot give Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees feedback

Fact: Giving and receiving feedback as a part of a reporting line relationship does not jeopardise cultural safety, it is good management.

However, the way you provide feedback is important. For all employees, regardless of cultural background, ambiguity supports mediocrity. Regardless of the feedback a respectful and curious line of enquiry can help build trust, which is the foundation for any functioning working relationship.

“Don't put aside good practice out of uncertainty or fear of difference. Be willing to have difficult conversations. Don't assume everyone is the same.”

Tracey McCosker - Hunter New England Local Health District

Myth 7: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people need special treatment

Fact: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people do not need special treatment. Many of the barriers and enablers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' participation in recruitment, employment and career progression are multiple and intertwined with social, cultural, geographic, and economic factors. Many of the approaches outlined in this guide are underpinned by inclusive leadership which benefits all.

My greatest success in supporting my Aboriginal colleagues is to just see them as professionals with additional perspectives and lived experiences to bring to the work. I have always found that they appreciate being treated just like everyone else at level and certainly not as the “Aboriginal executive”.

Ben Gales - Former Public Servant

Enablers and actions to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior executives with career progression

As a senior executive, there are actions you can take to enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior executives career progression. Some relate to the environment and culture you create as an inclusive leader, while other actions relate to specific moments that matter in recruitment and career conversations. We need your sponsorship and visible leadership and allyship to pave the way for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander talent to ascend to the highest echelons of leadership.

Cultural safety

A workplace that is culturally safe will value diverse skills, perspectives and experiences, allowing staff to feel comfortable to express their beliefs and authentic selves without fear of being negatively judged, shamed, or humiliated. A psychologically safe environment is more likely to be a culturally safe one. Staff perform and thrive when they feel psychologically and/or culturally safe, ultimately creating a feeling of belonging.

A workplace is also more likely to be culturally safe when its most senior leaders are honest and serious about their own cultural competence. This is not a one-off exercise; it must be revisited regularly.

Negative workplace behaviours such as racism, bullying, or harassment also contribute to a lack of safety. These behaviours are not acceptable, but unfortunately 2023 People Matter Employee Survey (PMES) data shows that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees still experience such behaviours at a higher rate.⁴

Time for action

- Take steps to reflect on your current level of cultural capability and what you do to create an environment where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees feel safe to express their culture, feel safe at work and thrive professionally.
- Refer to the [Cultural Capability Guide](#) for best practice and practical tips to create an inclusive environment.
- Take action to call out and prevent racism, harassment, and bullying.

“It’s more than just managing diversity – you have to sit with the uncomfortable bits of Australian settlement.”

Janet Schorer – TAFE NSW



Cultural load

Cultural load is the additional workload on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees that is often invisible, unrecognised, or acknowledged,⁵ for example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees being asked to educate the workforce or represent their community in the workplace. While there is no silver bullet for mitigating cultural load, being aware of it and not adding to it is integral. You can still consult with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees on actions to minimise cultural load and increase cultural safety.

The Gari Yala report highlights that 44% of Aboriginal staff feel that they need to compromise their cultural integrity at work.

Time for action

- Check in with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees about cultural load, especially around significant events.
- Give Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees the opportunity to decline work in relation to cultural load.
- Ask yourself if you regularly seek cultural advice or is it only around key celebration days such as NAIDOC?
- Do you need dedicated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees in an identified role. Speak to your HR business partner about what options might be appropriate.



Time for action

- Consider Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees in your workgroup. Identify how you can support them to continue to strengthen their cultural knowledge and meet cultural obligations.

Recruitment

Recruitment was one of the lowest scoring topics amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents in the [PMES 2023 survey result](#).⁶

Although the public sector recruitment process is highly structured, there are levers that can encourage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment at senior executive levels.

Getting started

All NSW Government agencies have a responsibility to use culturally safe recruitment practices to attract and recruit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. When recruiting, you should follow the [Government Sector Employment Act 2013 \(NSW\)](#) and [Government Sector Employment \(General\) Rules 2014 \(NSW\)](#) and your agency's usual recruitment processes, with some additional steps to consider.

As a role becomes vacant, work through these questions to assist your recruitment strategy:

- Refer to the [cultural capability guide](#) for best practice and advice on the attraction, recruitment, selection and assessment process.
- Consider whether there are talent pools that could be accessed to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander talent is included.
- The OPSC supports Aboriginal employees through career development programs such as [the Leadership Academy Leading Executives program](#) on a regular basis. Graduates of these programs could be a first point of call for career opportunities.
- Consider targeting recruitment activity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Cultural obligations

Just like non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees have obligations outside of work and may benefit from [flexible work principles and approaches](#). An inclusive manager will recognise and support this by allowing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees the time and space to meet their commitments—whether that is working remotely to be on country, or working flexibly.

- Have you asked your recruitment partner or executive search firm if they can provide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander candidates, including for non-identified roles?
- Why not consider an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander executive search firm as a part of a mainstream recruitment process?
- Consider the importance of location and office presence as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees working in regional Australia believe their geographical location limits their opportunities.⁷
- What would the growth opportunity look like for someone wanting to step into this role, rather than already operating at that capability level?
- What makes this role attractive? Top Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander talent is highly sought after across the market. To attract and retain employees, hiring managers will need to have a strong value proposition for the role.

More than two thirds of Aboriginal people in NSW live outside of Greater Sydney.

Census of Population and Housing, 2021

Unconscious bias

Unconscious bias can have a very real impact on your hiring decisions. While you can't avoid having bias, you can be aware of it, and through critical analysis seek to mitigate it.

“You must be prepared to test your own biases, be curious, learn and reflect, or don't even take it on.”

Sonja Stewart



Time for action

- Examine your team and your hiring history –are there any commonalities? This can be a very confronting process but only once we've accepted our bias, can we seek to change our behaviours.
- Remember that everyone works differently. Work out what's culture and what's just an individual's operating style –and then work out how to get the best from them.

Pipeline and talent management

The development of existing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior executives suffers when an organisation has not created a pipeline of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees ready to step into leadership roles. While the availability of backfill is challenging in particular identified roles from a purely statistical perspective, it is important to promote capable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees, or prepare for development opportunities.

You can also refer to OPSC's [talent review and talent management frameworks](#). These apply equally to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees and can support you to identify and have an active development of a diverse supply of leaders and key contributors across the NSW Public Sector.

“Mob are being held back because the organisation doesn't have a pipeline.”

Aboriginal senior executive



Time for action

- Consider Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees for backfill opportunities and development opportunities to build the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander pipeline.

Identified and generalist roles

Perhaps the strongest theme that emerged from the interviews was a belief that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees were pigeonholed into identified roles. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior executives referenced only being approached for identified roles, even if they have never previously held an Aboriginal specific role. They are regularly asked to apply for roles that are below their current grade or which require subject matter expertise that they do not hold, purely because it is an identified role and they are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. This two-dimensional approach to recruitment is insulting, devaluing and reinforces the idea that an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employee's only value is their cultural knowledge.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior executives cited having a diverse work portfolio as a key enabler to advancement – not just focusing on cultural issues but also broader policy and service areas. This also helps staff prepare for non-identified roles at Band 2 and above (refer to Myth 4).



Time for action

- Ask questions and be curious about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander candidates' career history and aspirations. Do not assume that they are not open to working in a mainstream role or that their skills aren't transferable. Additionally, they may have skills that are not being utilised in their current role but relevant in a potential role.
- Consider the level of cultural content required and what other subject matter could be included to provide a well-rounded experience for the incumbent. Keep this front of mind as you work through the [role design process](#) and ask HR or internal subject matter experts for advice as needed.

“Managers need to keep asking ‘what do I do next’. Too often they see providing a development opportunity as the job done – it’s actually just the first step”.

Nigel Lyons – Ministry of Health

Career conversations

Career conversations between senior executives and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 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. These conversations also facilitate greater representation, empowerment, and clear career pathways advancement opportunities, contributing to a more inclusive and thriving workplace culture.

It is important to create a psychologically and culturally safe space, and genuinely listening to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees' experiences and perspectives to effectively address barriers and support their career journeys. Refrain from jumping to solutions, and from sharing your perspective based on when you might have experienced something similar.

The [Capability Framework](#) can also be used as an individual career planning tool and for career conversations. The capability levels provide career markers, a way to measure current capability levels and to identify what capabilities are required for career progression or to make career moves within the sector.

Capability-based role descriptions help clarify the requirements of different jobs and the level of capability required for success in these roles. This allows individuals to shape their learning and development plans to meet their career goals and to take charge of their career development. The OPSC have [Executive sector role descriptions](#). Use the behavioural indicators to measure and benchmark performance.

You can ask Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees to reflect on their capabilities using the [Capability Discovery Tool](#) to identify key strengths and areas for development.

Some career conversation questions could include:

- What are your long-term career aspirations and goals and how can the organisation support you in achieving them?
- Can you reflect on your professional journey so far and identify any barriers or challenges you've faced as an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leader, and what support is needed to address them together?
- Are there specific skills or capabilities you would like to develop further to advance in your career?

- How can we ensure that your unique perspectives and experiences are valued and integrated into decision-making processes?
- What support or resources do you need to thrive in your current role and beyond?
- What opportunities do you see for yourself within the organisation, and how can we help you seize them?
- How do you balance your cultural identity with your professional responsibilities, and how can the organisation better support this balance?
- In what ways can we continue to promote a culture of inclusivity and respect within the workplace to benefit all employees, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders?



Time for action

- Talk about opportunities for development in the role or for career advancement.
- Take time to prepare for career conversations and consider some of the career questions.
- If you have a role and would like to put forward Aboriginal employees, be prepared to make the offer more than once and reinforce why you think they would be good in the role.

Support networking events and forums

It is important that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior executives who aspire to senior executive roles are given the opportunity to access the increasing number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander professional networking events and leadership forums that are available. Attending these events supports resilience and cultural and professional strength, improves retention and the likelihood of success in the role.

Sponsorship

Sponsorship is defined as “spending one’s social capital or using one’s influence to advocate for a protégé”.⁸ It is distinct from mentorship.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait employees face structural and systemic challenges in the workplace. Sponsorship has been cited by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior executives and current research supports it as a key enabler for career development pathway that can support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees. By choosing to sponsor, allies are committing to a personal action that makes a positive difference to an inequitable system.⁹

Considerations when finding a sponsee

First, consider if you have the capacity to take on a sponsee.

Think about who might be a good candidate for sponsorship. If you don’t know, who could you ask for a recommendation?

Consider your current working relationships. Are you already sponsoring someone and hadn’t realised it?

When you have a candidate in mind consider the following questions:

- Why would you choose them?
- Do they have a reputation for delivery?
- What can you offer them – through information or networks?
- Do you have some visibility over their work?

Once you are certain you wish to take on the candidate, reach out and ask the potential sponsee for a coffee. Be direct and clear about your intentions.

Source: [Why You Need Sponsors \(Not Just Mentors\)-and How to Find Them](#)

The values of sponsorship

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior executives value sponsors who can help bridge the gap to new areas through transferable skills. Sponsors, in turn, benefit from understanding the complexities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander subject matter. By embracing the idea of mutual learning, sponsors can learn as much as they teach.

Sharing your personal and positional power

Shadowing is a simple way of giving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees the opportunity to observe different roles and decision-making bodies and make an informed decision before embarking on a new career path. Expose people to all the different facets of leadership including:

- Strategic vs operational
- Insights into decision-making processes
- How you work across government and navigate the political landscape
- The difficulties of change leadership (e.g., cutting a budget, organisational restructures)
- Political nous and how government policy making works



Time for action

- Consider sponsoring an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior executive.
- Offer shadowing opportunities on a regular basis to a diverse range of employees. For example, consider what forums or meetings you could bring a shadow to and establish a regular opportunity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees to attend with you.
- Have a proactive conversation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees about the skills or exposure that would benefit them and suggest opportunities and connections.

“Lean into people with potential, work with them, make time for them, provide them with insights into decision making processes, navigating the political landscape, & across government.”

Mel Hawyes – Department of Planning, Housing & Infrastructure

Practicing allyship

As a senior executive, fostering alliances and supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior executives entails actively recognising and addressing racial inequality while committing to meaningful action against it.

Being an ally transcends mere acts of charity or generosity. It demands an acute awareness of inequality, a willingness to call it out, and a steadfast commitment to standing in solidarity for equality.

Allyship is a dynamic practice, not merely a static designation. It requires ongoing efforts in learning, unlearning, and being held accountable. Within the workplace, allyship becomes an indispensable component in advancing equality, diversity, and inclusion. It transcends mere belief in equality or empathetic understanding of marginalised groups; it necessitates a readiness to take concrete actions and leverage one's influence to advocate for change.

Examples of proactive demonstration of allyship:

- Advocating for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees by amplifying the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- Actively promoting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior executives work and achievements to influential leaders in the organisation or connecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior executives in the organisation to influential leaders.
- Actively boost the visibility and opportunities for career or networking.
- When encountering job opportunities that align with the capabilities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees, promote their candidacy by endorsing their names and sharing information about the position.

These proactive approaches contribute to creating a more inclusive and equitable work environment.



Time for action

- Reflect on your own role and influence in the workplace and how you can incorporate allyship into your daily practices.

Conclusion

“It’s a very Aboriginal thing to do, to give people greater responsibilities as they become able to take them on. It is a culturally appropriate transfer of role that involves respect in both directions.”

The NSW public service is committed to empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to reach Band 2 roles and beyond. Significant progress has been made to date but there is a recognition that a new approach is needed. The sector needs to provide the enabling environment, opportunities, and tools and resources, while Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior executives need to be ready and willing to take the leap. As a senior executive you are an important driver of opportunity and change.

Being successful in upper senior executive level roles is challenging for anyone, but Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior executives can face additional, specific hurdles including cultural load and systemic racism. This guide is a starting point for non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior executives to look at how they enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior leaders considering progressing into Band 2 roles and beyond. Community and culture can be a source of strength and resilience, encompassing cultural knowledge and systems that have existed for thousands of years. Your role as a sponsor, manager or ally is also as a source of resilience and empowerment. Career journeys are very personal, there is no one size fits all approach, but every journey is made easier and more fruitful with allies and champions.

“Managers should want the best for their Aboriginal staff - promote them, let them claim as many wins as possible, and if they leave because of the skills you gave them, that’s a good thing.”



Additional resources

There are lots of great resources available to continue to build competence in the diversity and inclusion space, as well as become a better leader and colleague for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander team members. These are just a few resources to consider:

- [Between Two Worlds: Indigenous Leaders Exercising Influence and Working across Boundaries.](#)
- [The Business of Inclusive Leadership.](#)
- [The Key to Inclusive Leadership.](#)
- [Which Two heads are better than one? How diverse teams create breakthrough ideas and make smarter decisions.](#)

Visit the [NSW OPSC's website](#) for further guidelines and resources concerning creating a positive workplace environment, the Code of Ethics and Conduct, prevention of workplace bullying and harassment.

The [NSW OPSC's recruitment and selection guide](#) provides best practice support on recruitment strategies.

References

- ¹ NSW Office of the Public Service Commissioner (OPSC) [Workforce Profile Report 2023](#), OPSC website, n.d., accessed 3 June 2024.
- ² C Brown, R DAlmada-Remedios, J Gilbert & N Young, [Gari Yala \(Speak the Truth\): Centreing the Work Experiences of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Australians](#), Diversity Council Australia/Jumbunna Institute, 2020, accessed 3 June 2024.
- ³ C Dean, [The merit myth](#), ANU College of Engineering, Computing & Cybernetics, 2020, accessed 20 May 2023.
- ⁴ OPSC, [People Matter Employee Survey \(PMES\) 2023](#), OPSC website, 2023, accessed 3 June 2024.
- ⁵ C Brown et al, [Gari Yala \(Speak the Truth\)](#), accessed 3 June 2024.
- ⁶ OPSC, [PMES 2023](#), accessed 6 June 2024.
- ⁷ S Faulkner & J Lahn, [Navigating to senior leadership in the Australian Public Service: Identifying Employment Barriers and Enablers for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples](#), Australian National University, 2019, accessed 6 June 2024.
- ⁸ J Omadeke, [What's the Difference Between a Mentor and a Sponsor?](#), Harvard Business Review, 20 October 2021, accessed 13 June 2023.
- ⁹ R Chow, L Phillips, B Lowery & M Unzueta, [Fighting Backlash to Racial Equity Efforts](#), MIT Sloan Management Review, 2021, 62(4), 25-31, accessed 6 June 2024.

Championing Aboriginal Senior Leadership: Guide for Allies and Sponsors in the NSW Public Sector

For more information

P: 02 9272 6000

E: enquiries-psc@psc.nsw.gov.au

W: www.psc.nsw.gov.au

