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Career development and progression



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Career barriers and enablers for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees

It is important to support the career development and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees, so they can progress in their careers and meet their career goals.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employee representation across all levels is critical to the NSW public sector being an exemplar employer for Aboriginal people and truly reflective of the community it serves.

Research commissioned in 2019 by the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, *Navigating to senior leadership in the Australian Public Service: Identifying employment barriers and enablers for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples* outlines factors that impact on the progression of Aboriginal people to senior leadership roles. These include:

- clustering of Aboriginal senior leaders at lower senior executive bands, often in Aboriginal Identified roles
- limited opportunities in regions
- preconceptions and biases, prejudice, and pigeonholing
- poor management practice
- inadequate organisational commitment to diversity
- institutional biases
- engaging with two worlds and cultural load (especially difficult at senior executive levels)
- lack of networks at senior executive levels.

The report recommends the following key enablers for career progression of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees:

- increased accountability at the highest levels for improving progression
- employment targets at all levels and monitor progress
- mentoring, coaching, and sponsoring of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees
- develop a greater number of senior roles and career opportunities
- clear pathways and plainly communicate expectations for career progression
- strong 'value proposition' specific to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees
- utilise employee data and the employee surveys to monitor career progression.

Ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees are valued and supported in their career journeys also means genuinely listening to what Aboriginal employees experience as barriers to advancement and what they believe is required to overcome them.

Performance development plans

Providing performance development feedback is important for all employees, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees. It is important to provide regular, direct, and honest feedback, while maintaining empathy for the person on the receiving end. It is important that feedback is respectfully provided and comes from a place of care.

Performance development tips:

- Have a proactive conversation with your Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees about the skills or exposure that would be beneficial for them and suggest opportunities and connections
- Put forward Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees for opportunities in different roles, not just identified roles, in order to increase their breadth of skills and experience
- Give Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees a seat at the table, letting them observe 'how things are done'. Having a voice in the conversation is hugely impactful
- Shadowing is a simple way of maximising impact for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees at all levels to enable them to observe different roles and help them make informed career decisions
- Actively learn from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees about their culture and lived experience.

Mentoring

Across the sector there are several reverse mentoring programs that aim to build cultural capability and cultural intelligence between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees and non-Aboriginal employees. The programs also aim to support the career progression of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees. These programs encourage Aboriginal employees to share their culture and lived experiences in a safe and supportive environment and help non-Aboriginal understand the lived experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees and what it means to walk between two worlds.

Case study – Senior Leaders Aboriginal Mentoring Program (SLAM) ▼

The Department of Planning and Environment first piloted their **Senior Leaders Aboriginal Mentoring Program (SLAM)** in 2020. SLAM is a reverse mentoring program where senior leaders are mentored by Aboriginal employees at any grade. The program is now a public sector wide initiative, aims to improve Aboriginal cultural capability amongst senior leaders (senior executive band 2 and above), and provides Aboriginal employees with the opportunity to share their culture and lived experiences in a safe and supportive environment.

Previous mentoring pairs have expressed how invaluable the opportunity is, with many continuing their mentoring relationship and going on to support each other in their career and cultural journeys.

What's involved in the program:

- The duration of the program is around 8 months and includes a combination of face-to-face Introductory Yarning Circle. Pairs then meet at least monthly.
- Participants have access to a range of resources, as well as online training.
- The cohort come back together for a face-to-face mid program Yarning Circle and a Closing Yarning Circle, which allows participants to provide feedback about their experience and continue to deepen networks and connections.

- Pairs are supported throughout by the Aboriginal People and Culture team.

One of the many benefits of a diversity based reverse mentoring relationships is that it pairs people who may not normally come together. These relationships are often profoundly transforming for both partners, promote a culture of inclusion and an organisation where everyone matters.

Outcomes include Aboriginal mentors being able to share their unique stories and histories, build relationships and experience the willingness of mentees to learn and grow. Mentees benefit by having honest conversations in a safe environment, connecting with local communities, and being inspired by their Aboriginal mentors to champion and embed Aboriginal outcomes within their agencies and teams.

A record 68 participants were matched as 34 pairs in 2023. Previous program participants have emphasised the lasting **impact of SLAM on both professional and personal lives.**

Sponsorship

Aboriginal and Torres Strait employees face structural and systemic challenges in the workplace. Sponsorship is a key enabler for career development pathway that can support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees. We have a significant number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior leaders at the Band 1 level. To break the ceiling for them to reach Band 2 and beyond, senior executive sponsors are required to champion Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees into more senior roles.

Sponsors take an active role by acting as allies and advocates and using their personal and positional power to support and elevate another person who does not have access to this kind of power. Sponsors also support to address bias and barriers that impact career progression.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Employee Networks

Most agencies have an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Employee Network that aims to provide a supportive, connected and culturally safe space for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees. Reach out to your agency's People and Culture team for more information. The PSC can provide information on starting employee networks.

Case study — Aboriginal support network



The Department of Planning and Environment (DPE) Aboriginal Support Network (ASN) was established in 1995 and has a proud history of supporting the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff.

Membership is currently open to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees from DPE and the Department of Regional NSW and currently has more than 200 members across both agencies.

The aim of the ASN is to provide support, career development and encouragement to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff while assisting both agencies as they strive to service our communities.

Members meet bi-annually to enable shared problem solving, networking and collaboration. Meetings are hosted at different locations across the state to enable local Aboriginal communities to engage and participate in meetings and identify opportunities for collaboration or support.

The ASN plays an important role in supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employee wellbeing, connection, and development. Members also have a role in collating insights and advice on policy and programs developed across public sector agencies.

Training and development opportunities aimed at improving capability and performance are offered to enhance current and future career prospects. Members also take part in volunteering to enhance their development skills, knowledge and experience.

The ASN actively seeks to promote and showcase community participation and achievements within both agencies and across the NSW public sector.

Aboriginal Senior Leadership Network

We have established the Aboriginal Senior Leaders Network. The network is open to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander NSW public sector leaders Clerk Grade 11/12 (or equivalent) and above. We host quarterly forums to connect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders and support their career development. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior leaders have been involved in the co-design and ongoing development of the network.

Over 50 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders have attended each forum, providing positive feedback about the forums. **Get in touch with us** for more information or if you are an Aboriginal senior leader and you would like to join the network.

NSW Aboriginal Career Leadership Development Program

The Leadership Academy's Aboriginal Career and Leadership Development Program (ACLDP) is open to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees from Clerk Grade 7/8 and above. The program creates a pipeline of future Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders for the sector. Since 2014, 447 employees have successfully completed the program. For more information reach out to us.

Alumni Program

The ACLDP Alumni Program enables past participants to continue to develop, connect and enhance their management skills through training and development sessions, peer support, networking, and information sharing. Upon completion of the ACLDP program, participants can opt in to receive updates about continuous learning opportunities for their ongoing professional development.

Considerations for career development and progression

- Do you consider your Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employee for opportunities and provide support in career development?
- Do you have continuous and robust conversations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait employees on career advancement?

Useful links and other information

Career Trackers

Career Trackers match students with employment partners to create meaningful internships that build skills, knowledge and connection with other First Nations talent in diverse fields and industries.



Performance Development Framework

The Performance Development Framework sets out benchmark expectations for performance management in the sector.



NSW Leadership Academy

The Leadership Academy delivers trusted leadership development programs that transform the individual and their teams to deliver benefits for the people of NSW.



What's the Difference Between a Mentor and a Sponsor?

Harvard Business Review, Omadeke, J. (2021)



Don't Just Mentor Women and People of Color. Sponsor Them.

Harvard Business Review, Chow, R. (2021)

