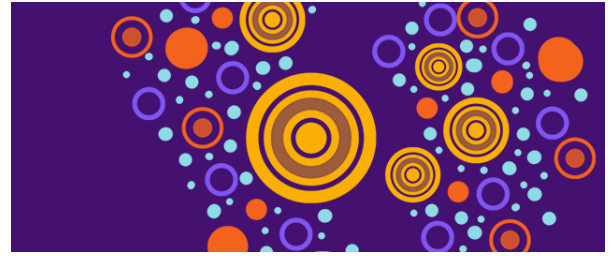


# Understanding cultural capability



## On this page

### [Tips for improving cultural capability and safety](#)

### [Useful links and other information](#)

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people draw on cultural strengths and offer a wealth of life experiences, knowledge, and skills. We value their significant contributions across the sector, including through:

- **enriching diversity of thought and leadership:** by sharing unique views and insights, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people contribute to more diverse and inclusive organisations and leadership
- **innovation:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives increase the diversity of our organisations, building our capacity to be creative and innovate
- **improving service delivery:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees contribute to a workforce that reflects the communities we serve and help us better understand Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community needs.

Navigate through the information below to increase your understanding of key cultural capability concepts and how your workplaces can create culturally aware and safe spaces.

## Video embed:

[Cultural capability guide - Brendan](#)

## Understanding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Culture



### Recognising kinship and family relationships

The kinship systems for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are significantly different to how most non-Aboriginal people view their families and relationships to each other.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kinship is more than a social hierarchy. It goes back to belonging and connection to the land. Connection to country defines identity and brings families together. Under this system a person can have many mothers, fathers, uncles, aunties, brothers, and sisters who are not related by blood or regional language group.

The complexity of kinship is more than just titles. It can influence social protocols, how people care for children, manage business, and even share wealth. It also explains there might be many mothers, fathers, aunties, uncles, brothers, and sisters gathered all together under the one roof in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family.

The notion of family in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture is closely tied to themes of connectedness and kinship. Family and kinship bind Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people together. Kinship determines responsibilities towards others, but also how one relates to others through marriage, ceremony, funeral roles, and behaviour patterns. People who hold a position in the kinship system have a responsibility to adhere to kinship principles through their actions.

### **Get to know your Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander team member and follow their lead**

Focus groups conducted by Jumbunna Institute highlighted that identity is a personal journey, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees may identify in various ways. It is important that you get to know your Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander team member and follow the person's lead on language preferences related to identity.

The impacts of the Stolen Generations, historical government policies, and colonisation more generally, means that some people may not know their family, community, and identity. For some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, connecting with a nation, or a language group is an ongoing journey.

It is important not to make generalisations about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people or ask insensitive questions. Examples of offensive and insensitive commentary include:

- generalisations about the appearance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- comments regarding the percentage, 'part' or 'how much' of a person's identity or heritage is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
- the use of the acronym 'ATSI' or word 'Aborigine/s', the latter of which is derived from colonisation and has a racist connotation.
- using terms such as "walkabout".

There are many Aboriginal English words and phrases. If they are not part of your regular vocabulary, it is best to avoid using them, rather than risk coming across as inauthentic or awkward.

Providing a safe workplace that is inclusive, creates a feeling of belonging, and where everyone listens to and learns from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees is key.

It is important to know and understand what cultural safety means to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and to be aware of how language and behaviour may be interpreted and perceived.

## Cultural awareness

Cultural awareness means being aware of, and developing sensitivity to, cultural difference and cultural diversity. It involves knowledge, attitudes and values that demonstrate an openness and respect for other people and other cultures, languages, religions, dress, communication styles and more.

## Cultural safety

In a culturally safe workplace all employees feel comfortable, supported, and respected. Employees feel they can contribute to discussions, feel safe at work and are more productive.

Cultural safety was defined in consultations as ‘a place where I can bring my whole self’ or ‘where I feel safe with no judgement’.

## Cultural competency

Cultural competency is a set of behaviours, attitudes and policies that come together to allow people to work effectively in cross-cultural situations. It is best understood as something people move towards along a continuum rather than a point in time achievement.

## Everyone’s Business

In collaboration with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees and organisations, we developed **Everyone’s Business**, which is a set of cultural capability training programs and resources for NSW public sector employees. The programs provide learnings and best practice on how to support and build culturally safe workplaces across NSW. The programs help employees understand past policies and practices that continue to affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people today.

The programs and resources include:

- a calendar of Aboriginal significant events and celebrations
- guidance on delivering an Acknowledgement of Country
- cultural awareness journey eLearning
- eLearning about the Stolen Generations.

Some agencies have their own cultural training programs. Contact your agency People and Culture or Learning and Development team for further information.

## Cultural load

Cultural load is the additional workload on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees that is often invisible, unrecognised, or acknowledged (see the [Gari Yala \(Speak the Truth\)](#) report). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees are often asked to undertake extra responsibilities such as educating the workforce on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history and issues and assisting in organising cultural events.

Cultural load is a key contributor to a culturally unsafe environment. Our workplaces should be actively working towards reducing the cultural load. Some practical tips to do this include:

- encouraging employees to do their own research
- not expecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees to educate other employees in their workplaces
- not expecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees to speak on behalf of their entire community. Like all communities, there are diverse views
- consulting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees on actions to minimise cultural load and increase cultural safety.

## Negative workplace behaviours

There is no place for racist behaviour, abuse, bullying or harassment in NSW public sector workplaces. Racism towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees is unlawful and not tolerated in the NSW public sector, but unfortunately data shows us that negative workplace behaviours are still experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees.

During consultations in the development of this guide, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees shared experiences of racism. These experiences are consistent with People Matter Employee Survey (PMES) results. Since 2021, the PMES has included a question about experiences of racism and discrimination in the workplace. Results show a significant gap between whole of sector results and the results for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees for experiences of racism, discrimination, bullying and sexual harassment.

In 2023:

- 17% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents reporting that they experienced racism in the past 12 months, compared to 5% for whole-of-sector respondents.
- 19% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents reporting that they experienced bullying in the past 12 months, compared to 13% for whole-of-sector respondents.
- 7% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents reporting that they experienced sexual harassment in the past 12 months, compared to 5% for whole-of-sector respondents.

The PMES also indicates that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees do not report experiences these negative workplaces behaviours at the same rate as other employees and when they do, they are not satisfied with the outcome. Reasons given for not reporting include that it won't make a difference, it won't be taken seriously, it may have negative consequences for them, and it will not remain confidential.

Employers have a responsibility to ensure their employees, and people who apply for a job with them, are treated fairly and to prevent racism, unlawful discrimination, harassment and bullying. Employees also have a responsibility to treat others equally, fairly and with respect. Employees who have witnessed racism, unlawful discrimination, harassment, or bullying are encouraged to act and support colleagues who have experienced it.

It is unlawful for an employer to act in a discriminatory or harassing way in specific employment circumstances (see *Anti-Discrimination Act* and Commonwealth anti-discrimination legislation). Employers have a legal responsibility to take all reasonable steps to prevent discrimination and harassment.

The *Work Health and Safety Act 2011* imposes a duty to ensure the health and safety of workers, manage risks to health and safety, and eliminate (or minimise) psychosocial hazards, including harassment or bullying, so far as reasonably practicable. Workers also have responsibilities, including to take reasonable care that their acts or omissions do not adversely affect the health and safety of others.

## Code of Ethics and Conduct



Government sector employees are required to comply with the **Code of Ethics and Conduct for government sector employees** under section 8A of the *Government Sector Employment Act*.

Managers and executives have a responsibility under the Code to lead and promote implementation of **the Ethical Framework**, ensure their workplace culture, practices and systems operate consistently with the Ethical Framework, and to act promptly and with due process to prevent and address any breaches of the Ethical Framework.

All government sector employees have a responsibility to demonstrate high levels of behaviour consistent with the Ethical Framework.

## Positive workplace environments



Workplaces should:

- ensure all employees are aware that racism, discrimination bullying, harassment and other negative workplace behaviours are unlawful and not tolerated
- ensure all employees are aware of their responsibilities under the Code of Ethics and Conduct and that action will be taken in relation to misconduct or unlawful conduct
- remind all employees of internal complaints policies and reporting options

- encourage those who have experienced racism or any kind of discrimination, harassment or bullying at work to make a report
- adopt a trauma informed, person centred approach to ensure the individual who has made the report is supported and feels informed and empowered throughout the process
- provide information and links for employees who wish to make an external complaint.

## Tips for improving cultural capability and safety

- Reflect on your role and responsibility to support and develop Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander talent and contribute to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment sector targets.
- Reflect on the guiding principles and how you can embed them in your teams.
- Recognise and understand the ongoing impact of historical, cultural, and social legacies on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and take steps to broaden your existing understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and peoples.
- Recognise kinship and family relationships and that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees may need to navigate a range of moral, cultural, political, and personal dilemmas using their own values and expectations.
- Get to know your Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees and follow the person's lead on language preferences related to identity.
- Get to know your Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander local community for example by attending significant events such as NAIDOC events.
- Take action to build and strengthen cultural capability in your team and workplace.

## Useful links and other information

### **Closing the Gap**

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap has 19 national socio-economic targets across areas that have an impact on life outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.



### **People Matter Employee Survey**

The PMES survey includes information on engagement rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees across all portfolios.



### **NSW Workforce Profile Report**

The Workforce Profile Report provides in-depth data and information about the NSW public sector workforce, and can be used to inform workforce management strategies and policy.



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**Why saying 'Aborigine' isn't OK: 8 facts about Indigenous people in Australia**

Guidance from Amnesty International on inclusive language for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.



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**Victorian Public Sector Commission Cultural Capability Toolkit**

This cultural capability toolkit was developed to support cultural capability in the Victorian Public Sector.

