



**Victorian  
Public Sector  
Commission**



# Supporting Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff

**Wellbeing is integral to a productive and happy workplace.**

Some important things you can do for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander wellbeing include:

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

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

when non-Aboriginal workers are aware that:

- Building working relationships takes time and needs to be based on mutual respect for similarities and differences.
- Relationships between Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and non-Aboriginal workers means breaking down barriers and going the extra step in building respectful, personal and non-judgemental relationships.
- Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees know that they are part of the same community as their clients and so must keep this in mind when developing working relationships. Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees may also have experience of issues such as grief, loss and trauma and will be at various stages in their own journey to healing.
- Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees would agree that they are not experts on all aspects of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander culture and community life. Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees are required to respect their cultural boundaries and what authority they have been given to discuss certain things. This is not, however, a license to exclude Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees.
- Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees are often utilised to respond to all things Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander in the workplace and speak on behalf of all Aboriginal people. This adds to employees cultural load and is a risk to employee wellbeing.

## **Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Cultural Loads**

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

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

## Flexible working arrangements

Some of your Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff may need flexible working arrangements for reasons such as:

- Sorry Business
- Child care responsibility
- Cultural responsibilities.

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

## Racism at Work

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

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

Your role as a manager is to:

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

process.

## Shame in the workplace

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff may experience shame when being asked to share personal information or being asked to talk about personal achievements etc.

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

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

## Workplace Cultural Safety

A [culturally safe work place](#) is essential for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff wellbeing.

## Supporting further training and study

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

## Mentoring

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

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

## Formal Mentoring Programs

Formal workplace mentoring involves a structured agreement between two people.

Good formal mentoring:

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

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

## Informal Mentor Relationships

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

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

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

## Sponsoring

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

Tips for establishing good sponsoring:

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

## Foundations for Good Supervisory Relationships

Good relationships between a manager and staff member are built on the respect and value accorded to the unique role that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff can

have within organisations. Managers should acknowledge the skills and knowledge that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander professionals bring to the organisation. Supervisors also need to:

- understand the demands on Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers, who may be part of the same community as their clients
  - realise that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander professionals are unlikely to respect you simply because of your position in the organisation, because the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander way is based on relationships that can only be built over time
  - recognise that understanding who you are and taking time to build relationships are important foundations for supervision
  - acknowledge the importance of community relationships and events for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander professionals
  - acknowledge the added challenges for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff in supporting other staff to build relationships with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities
  - supervise Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff in the way that is most comfortable for them, and be aware of the impact of language and venue
  - support Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff to access cultural support and mentoring from an appropriate Aboriginal organisation or Aboriginal professional
  - expect that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff, like all staff in your organisation, adhere to the organisation's code of conduct and professional standards of behaviour<sup>5</sup>
  - address issues as they arise and provide feedback promptly.
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## **Questions for managers and workplaces in supporting Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff:**

- Do you support Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff through personal, family and cultural commitments and provide support/services for impacts of grief, loss and trauma?
- Do you promote cultural safety and the responsibility of all staff, carers and volunteers to treat Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people respectfully and

respond quickly and appropriately to racism, discrimination or cultural abuse?

- Do you clearly display information regarding what staff, carers, volunteers and community members can do if they believe they have been treated in a racist or culturally abusive way by someone within the organisation?
  - How do you encourage and support staff, carers and volunteers to make disclosures regarding racism, discrimination or cultural abuse and have a documented policy and procedure for managing it if it occurs?
  - Are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people who make disclosures regarding racism, discrimination or cultural abuse provided with culturally appropriate support throughout the report/investigation process?
  - How do you protect Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff from being overwhelmed by the demands made of the 'expert'? How does the organisation support Aboriginal staff in this role?
  - Does the organisation's employee assistance program (EAP) give Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff choice about accessing an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander counsellor?
  - Are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff supported and given time to attend significant community events (for example, events during NAIDOC week)?
  - Are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff provided with access to other Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff, either within or outside the organisation, for support and mentoring?
  - Are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff encouraged, resourced and supported to become workplace mentors for other staff?
  - Is there a formal partnership in place with your local Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation to provide cultural support and mentoring to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff in your organisation?
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## Useful links and other information

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

Uncle Richard Franklin discussing cultural load:

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

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

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

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

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

(5) Source: VACCA Building Respectful Partnerships 2010.