

## Connecting with Community

Connecting with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander<sup>[i]</sup> communities and building genuine relationships is a key pillar of every organisation's reconciliation journey.

There is **no fast-tracked way** to develop relationships; **connecting with community** is a process that comes with the three Ts:



Approach relationships genuinely and with respect. You must make clear what your intentions are when working with Aboriginal people and communities.<sup>[ii]</sup> Be open and willing to listen, learn, and acknowledge the value of cultural knowledge that may be shared with you throughout the process of building relationships.<sup>[iii]</sup>

## Engaging locally

Use opportunities of informal networking to have a yarn and develop connection and trust.

**When engaging with your local community you should...**

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- Know what Aboriginal Country your office/s are located on and always acknowledge that Country and its Traditional Custodians.
- Find out what community dates and events are celebrated in your local area and participate in them when possible.[iv] Be aware that some spaces are not open to non-Indigenous people and this needs to be respected.
- Show up at community events that are open to everyone: this could be NAIDOC Week, events held by Aboriginal Community Controlled organisations, seminars at universities, etc. Reconciliation NSW posts events regularly on our social media and Events Calendar, so be sure to follow us and check out our website.
- Keep up to date with what is happening in community by following local Aboriginal organisations and community groups on Social Media.

When connecting with community, **take time** to explain to people who you are and what you do.[v] **Be patient**, do not expect every Aboriginal person to have knowledge of, or want to talk publicly about, Aboriginal cultures, families, histories or issues. **Remember** that, like all groups of people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people hold **diverse opinions and values**.

[vi]



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### Making contact

Research possible points of contact that are local and relative to your organisation. Points of contact may include[vii] :

- Local Aboriginal Land Councils
- First Nations RAP consultants
- Aboriginal units within universities and TAFE colleges
- Local Reconciliation Groups
- Local Aboriginal Community Controlled organisations
- Aboriginal Liaison Officers in various government departments and other relevant organisations
- Aboriginal Medical Services
- Aboriginal Health Workers within the Department of Health
- Aboriginal Corporations
- Juvenile Justice Centres

### **Be aware of Sorry Business, cultural responsibilities and customs**

Like all people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have responsibilities to their family and community.

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**As outlined by our Cultural Safety factsheet**, it is important to understand Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives on community, kinship and family. These cultural responsibilities are extremely important and may sometimes conflict with workplace responsibilities, and this requires awareness[viii].

**‘Sorry Business’** is a time for Mourning, and *“because of the ongoing effects of colonisation, systems of oppression, access to services, and a lack of equity, First Nations peoples experience a higher number of deaths”[ix]* .

Deaths are a time for full cultural ceremony and obligation. **Sorry Business may conflict with workplace responsibilities**, and this requires understanding. Our Cultural Safety factsheet explores how workplaces can better understand cultural responsibilities through cultivating a cultural lens that acknowledges the demands of Indigenous peoples **walking in two cultural worlds**: white Australia and its Western organisational demands, as well as Indigenous identity and cultural responsibilities.[x]



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### Trauma informed engagement

When connecting with community and initiating relationship building, it is important to be culturally aware of the histories of trauma that shape life experiences for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Histories of trauma can result in:

- Mistrust of white institutions. This does not mean that friendly relationships cannot be developed.[xi]
  - Sorry business. [xii]
- o **Be aware** of Sorry Business and give Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples their space when it is needed.
- o **Be aware** that talking of topics that have caused trauma, such as the Stolen Generations, genocide and Sorry business, is sensitive and triggering.

### Purposeful engagement

Purposeful engagement entails walking alongside and behind Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.



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### Walking behind and alongside means to:

- Demonstrate respect for sovereignty, cultures and ways of life.
- Provide opportunities for meaningful collaboration and relationship-building.
- Invite First Nations people to the table and understand the importance of why they need to be there.
- Listen to what is important in the communities you are engaging with. Listening is more important than speaking.
- Remunerate people for sharing knowledge.
- Include voices from across generations.

### Demonstrate your commitment to relationships

- Follow-up on requests and keep in contact. This is an important part of establishing trust and building relationships.[xiii]
- **Consultation is not a one-off experience; it is ongoing and reciprocal.**[xiv]
- Provide morning tea or lunch when meeting with Elders, Aboriginal volunteers and service providers as this is a great way to initiate genuine and down-to-earth interactions.[xv]
- Engage slowly, an activity like weaving together or having a cup of tea together is a great way to get to know each other!



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### Partnerships

Workplaces should reflect on how they can support local Aboriginal organisations when engaging with them. This doesn't need to be solely monetary; it could be through volunteers, use of skills, and resources.

Your organisation may choose to commence a partnership with its local Aboriginal community or an Aboriginal community-controlled organisation within your sector.

- Partnerships are developed from long-standing relationships, and long-standing relationships are not tokenistic.

A partnership requires a process of consultation **before the partnership can commence**, asking questions like:

- How do your organisational values align?
- Do your reconciliation visions align with their goals?
- What is the purpose of the partnership?
- Does the partnership align and benefit **both ways?**

Respectful curiosity is the key, asking "*what would you like to see us do?*", **not** "*this is what we want to do.*"

***Walking beside and behind First Nations peoples makes room for a genuine and two-way relationship to grow.***

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- [i] Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Aboriginal, and First Nations are all terms used interchangeably to refer to the First Peoples of the continent now known as Australia.
- [ii] Building Mutually Beneficial Partnerships, the Centre for Volunteering, p. 10, file:///C:/Users/Madeline/Downloads/Building%20Mutually%20Beneficial%20Partnerships%20(2).pdf
- [iii] Ibid.
- [iv] Aboriginal Education Consultative Group. "Engaging with Aboriginal Communities - Where do we start?" <https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/acecqa/files/NEL/engaging-with-aboriginal-communities1.pdf>, p. 2.
- [v] Ibid.
- [vi] Working with Aboriginal communities, A Guide to Community Consultation and Protocols, Board of Studies (2008). <https://ab-ed.nesa.nsw.edu.au/files/working-with-aboriginal-communities.pdf>, p. 17-19
- [vii] Working with Aboriginal communities, A Guide to Community Consultation and Protocols, Board of Studies (2008). <https://ab-ed.nesa.nsw.edu.au/files/working-with-aboriginal-communities.pdf>.
- [viii] Kinship and Connectedness, the Centre for Volunteering, p. 10, file:///C:/Users/Madeline/Downloads/Building%20Mutually%20Beneficial%20Partnerships%20(2).pdf file:///C:/Users/Madeline/Downloads/Kinship%20and%20Connectedness%20(1).pdf
- [ix] Ibid.
- [x] Jenny Stewart and James Warn, "Between Two Worlds: Indigenous Leaders Exercising Influence and Working across Boundaries", Australian Journal of Public Administration 76, No. 1 (2016): 15, <https://doi-org.ipacez.nd.edu.au/10.1111/1467-8500.12218>.
- [xi] Building Mutually Beneficial Partnerships, The Centre for Volunteering, p. 10.
- [xii] Kinship and Connectedness, the Centre for Volunteering, p. 10, file:///C:/Users/Madeline/Downloads/Building%20Mutually%20Beneficial%20Partnerships%20(2).pdf file:///C:/Users/Madeline/Downloads/Kinship%20and%20Connectedness%20(1).pdf
- [xiii] "Connecting to Aboriginal Culture and Community", Swan Alliance Communities for Children, March 2016, [https://www.ngala.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Ngala\\_CULTURAL\\_PROTOCOLS\\_lowres2.pdf](https://www.ngala.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Ngala_CULTURAL_PROTOCOLS_lowres2.pdf), p. 7
- [xiv] Ibid, p. 7
- [xu] "Connecting to Aboriginal Culture and Community", Swan Alliance Communities for Children, March 2016, [https://www.ngala.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Ngala\\_CULTURAL\\_PROTOCOLS\\_lowres2.pdf](https://www.ngala.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Ngala_CULTURAL_PROTOCOLS_lowres2.pdf), p. 6