Cultural Safety in the Workplace

What is workplace cultural safety?

Cultural safety in the workplace is an ongoing experience for First Nations employees. This experience relies on educated, culturally competent non-Indigenous people within the workplace who understand First Nations perspectives and histories and are committed to the lifelong journey of cultural education. Creating a culturally safe workplace is both an individual employee's responsibility as well as an organisation's.

Cultivating cultural safety in the workplace is more than a tick a box exercise. *"It is about a deliberate and determined commitment to understand and rectify behaviour sets that give rise to cultural harm to Indigenous people within the company."[i]*

Over a quarter of Indigenous employees have reported that they work in a culturally unsafe workplaces.[ii]

This lack of cultural safety was due to:[iii]

- Feeling that their skills, perspectives, and experiences are not valued
- Low representation in Indigenous focused roles
- Not feeling comfortable in expressing cultural beliefs
- A dominance of Western corporate views that do not attempt to appreciate First Nations cultures and knowledges.

Lack of cultural safety for First Nations employees can result in:

- High staff turnover
- Indigenous staff feeling lost and unsupported
- Lower job satisfaction
- The workplace less likely to be recommended to other Indigenous people[iv]
- Mental health strain
- Increased institutional mistrust
- High cultural load and identity strain[v]

Workplaces have a responsibility to establish practises that assist First Nations employees to feel more comfortable in the workplace.[vi]
Throughout this factsheet are some recommendations that workplaces should explore to create a culturally safe workplace.

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Education as a starting point

Despite progress in many areas of reconciliation, Australians still have a long way to go in learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, perspectives, and histories. This reflects the need for Australian educational institutions to embed these perspectives.

Leaders in the workplace should pave the way for education on First Nations cultures, perspectives, and histories. Access to information has become increasingly easy, and First Nations stories, books, media, and TV shows are plentiful. Learning about the history of this country and the colonisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is crucial to building understanding, helping to create a culturally safe workplace.

Cultural competency training.

To improve the safety and wellbeing of First Nations staff, cultural competency training is essential for all employees. Every organisation should include cultural competency training in their Reconciliation Action Plans**.**

Always engage an Indigenous-led cultural competency organisation.

This is important so all staff in the workplace feel a sense of competency and understanding and are less likely to direct their questions to Indigenous staff, which becomes tiresome and straining.

"Cultural competence is about our will and actions to build understanding between people, to be respectful and open to different cultural perspectives, strengthen cultural security and work towards equality in opportunity."[vii]

Creating an Aboriginal cultural lens for the workplace

This may sound like a daunting task, but once education and cultural competency training are in place, an Aboriginal cultural lens will begin to manifest. Organisations at RAP Stretch or Elevate levels should be in the process of understanding what an Aboriginal cultural lens in the workplace means.

It is the dominance of non-Indigenous perspectives and practices that can contribute to a lack of cultural awareness and safety. Therefore, implementing a wide understanding of First Nations perspectives is a way to counter a culturally unsafe workplace, and is the first step to creating a cultural lens.

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So, what is creating an Aboriginal cultural lens?

It is a process of re-educating the workplace to understand the different perspectives that sit outside a Western way of understanding the world.

Changing the dominant cultural lens means attempting to learn from diverse perspectives and implementing those perspectives into an organisation's operations. [viii]

In the context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives, this involves learning about:

- Indigenous histories
- What cultural identity means to First Nations Peoples
- Spirituality and connections:
  - Community & Family
  - Links to Country
  - Drawing strength from Country
  - Totems
  - Kin
- Histories of trauma

Example of a cultural lens in practise: some leading organisations in the RAP network have introduced paid cultural leave, signifying that employers recognise that First Nations peoples walk in two different cultures and worlds.

"The important thing to remember about "Indigenous culture" is that it's not just one culture. Prior to colonial invasion, there were over 500 Indigenous nations. So there are no blanket rules around what Indigenous staff want or need."[ix]

See the examples provided of things an organisation should know about First Nations cultures to be able to implement a cultural lens.

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Different perspectives

Below are characteristics that shape some of the differences in worldviews between First Nations perspectives and Western colonial perspectives.

Characteristics of First Nations worldview:
- A world of spiritual unity between people, nature, land and time
- A world where material goods and technologies are de-emphasised, or, seen as a means to an end rather than the end itself
- A worldview that emphasizes relationships

Compared to characteristics of Western ways of knowing:
- A world of compartmentalisation created by science and maths (positivistic thinking)
- A world where material goods and technologies are highly valued
- A world view that centres humans above all living things, using the world around them as a resource to be utilised for progress.

Language

There are differences in Indigenous languages that lead to different understandings of the world.[x] Indigenous languages are not always a straightforward translation, concepts and ideas may be fundamentally based on different ways of knowing. Tyson Yunkaporta highlights this in his book, Sand Talk:

- In Indigenous languages, the individualistic framework of English is non-existent, and instead pronouns relating to 'I' are spoken with their relationship to the natural world around them.
- Pronouns are spoken in pairs.
- Perspectives encompass the natural world and the symbiotic relationship of man within nature.
- Time is not a linear continuum, it is interpreted through the natural patterns around us.
- Yarning is not a two-way discussion that leads to one opinion being proven over the other.
- Yarning is overlapping, a way we can build off the perspectives of others to develop rounded decisions and understandings.

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Support in First Nations leadership

Workplaces have a responsibility to support Indigenous leaders through cultivating a cultural lens that better understands First Nations experiences and perspectives. Studies reveal that Indigenous leaders in the workplace are required to navigate the demands of leadership in two worlds: white Australia and its Western organisational demands, as well as Indigenous identity and cultural responsibilities.[xi]

Through cultivating an Aboriginal lens, organisations can empathise with the navigation of two worlds, and how the impacts of dispossession on First Nations peoples affects how they operate in a Western corporate cultural context. This results in a broader understanding of Indigenous leadership in mainstream organisations for a safer workplace.[xii]

This factsheet has begun to explore the preliminary steps an organisation can take in the journey of creating a culturally safe workplace for the benefit of all employees. Cultural safety is not short-term, it is a deliberate, ongoing effort by all employees to commit to learning and decolonising. We recommend using the range of resources provided for further research and understanding.

[i] Mandy Braddick, "Blak Nation Podcast conversations - cultural safety in the workplace," Indigenous X, Oct 8, 2021, https://indigenousx.com.au/blak-nation-podcast-conversations-cultural-safety-in-the-workplace.
[ii] Diversity Council Australia & Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research, Gari Yala: Speak the Truth - Synopsis Report, 17 Nov, 2020, https://www.dca.org.au/sites/default/files/dca_synopsisreport_web_0.pdf, 11.
[iii] Gari Yala, 11.
[iv] Gari Yala, 11.
[v] Gari Yala, 12-14.
[vi] Eileen Sakai, "The impact of cultural perceptions within the workplace", Xenium, March 9, 2016, https://xeniumhr.com/blog/culture/the-impact-of-cultural-perceptions-within-the-workplace/.
[vii] Rhonda Livingstone, "What does it mean to be culturally competent?", ACECQA, July 10, 2014, https://wehearyou.acecqa.gov.au/2014/07/10/what-does-it-mean-to-be-culturally-competent/.
[viii] Sakai, "The impact of cultural perceptions within the workplace".
[ix] Kate Neilson, "3 things you might not know about Indigenous employment", HRM Online, July 8, 2019, https://www.hrmonline.com.au/diversity-and-inclusion/3-things-about-indigenous-employment/

[x] Lynne Malcolm, host, "Indigenous Language and Perception," All in the Mind, podcast, Sep 1, 2019, https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/allinthemind/indigenous-language-and-perception/11457578
[xi] 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.
[xii] Stewart and Warn, "Between Two Worlds", 15.