

Tokenism

What is Tokenism?

"Cultural tokenism occurs when aspects of culture are acknowledged inadequately or simply because someone is trying to 'tick a box'. The result is an activity which is devoid of any real meaning."[i]

Tokenism in a RAP

Organisational RAPs are at risk of tokenism. When developing a RAP, it is important an organisation understands the difference between the desire to be seen doing the right thing, as compared to genuine intention for lasting impact.

Going beyond ticking a box requires a critical assessment of the intentions of your organisation and its RAP objectives. Inauthentic actions occur when an organisation is more focussed on symbolic gestures than meaningful outcomes.[ii]

Overcoming this requires a genuine commitment by an organisation for positive impact, where outcomes are felt by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Tokenism in the workplace

According to Indigenous employees, authenticity in the workplace is not common, with only **26 percent of First Nations employees** feeling that they **work in a truly authentic organisation**[iii]. Authenticity within an organisation is extremely important for First Nations staff.

"Compared to those in organisations with low authenticity, workers in highly authentic organisations are:

- 5 times more likely to always be **satisfied with their job**
- 8 times more likely to **recommend their workplace** to other Indigenous people
- 2.5 times **less likely** to intend to **leave their employer** in the next year" [iv].

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What does a tokenist look like?

"Tokenists are those who know, on a superficial level, that they need to be "seen" to be engaged in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues and celebrate our cultures." [v]



Examples of tokenism

An Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander artist being asked to offer their work for "exposure", without offer of payment. [vi]

Hiring Aboriginal staff, but failing to accommodate for cultural responsibilities and unique experiences caused by the history of colonisation. (i.e. Sorry Business, frequent exposure to trauma.)

Displaying boomerangs as part of NAIDOC Week, but failing to provide information around their history, where they were sourced, and their meaning. [vii]

Only engaging with Indigenous cultures, histories, and perspectives on specific days of the year such as NAIDOC, Sorry Day and National Reconciliation Week. "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are diverse, multi-layered, living and always changing. To acknowledge it only once or twice a year fails to attribute it the value it deserves." [viii]

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How to engage with reconciliation authentically

“It is generally not an action itself that is inherently tokenistic but rather the attitude or intent behind an action that matters most. If the attitude or intent behind a reconciliation initiative is genuine, and is well consulted on, contextualised, and evaluated, the likelihood that it will be ‘tokenistic’ is small.”[ix]



Overcoming tokenism revolves around the intentions of your actions. Don't allow fear of being tokenistic to prevent you from engaging with First Nations perspectives. It is important that organisations assess their intentions when attempting to create better outcomes for First Nations Peoples.

Developing a RAP

When developing a RAP, the first step for any organisation is to critically reflect on your RAP actions. If your intentions are authentic, your outcomes are more likely to be meaningful.[x]

Some actions will be more symbolic in meaning, such as acknowledging Country at the beginning of meetings or hanging up local First Nations artworks. However such actions are important steps in recognising Indigenous perspectives in the workplace. [xi]

The questions your organisation should be asking itself to overcome tokenism:

- 1) Is your organisation developing your RAP to look good rather than be good?
- 2) What looks good and what makes true and lasting impact?
 - How does your RAP relate to real people and community?
 - How is your RAP felt by First Nations communities?
 - What is the real substance of what you're trying to do?
- 3) Are you committed to the lifelong journey of reconciliation?

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When creating RAP actions: [xii]

- 1) What is the reason or motivation behind the action? How does this clearly and meaningfully connect with your Vision for Reconciliation?
- 2) Has the action been designed, developed and/or delivered in collaboration with your local Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community and staff?
- 3) Has the action been critically evaluated and contextualised

Don't overpromise and underdeliver! This is especially important when it comes to the development of your RAP. Your RAP journey isn't about getting to the next RAP level, it's about committing to the process and doing it slowly and meaningfully for genuine understanding and authentic progress in reconciliation.

Remember - Have safe and open conversations about reconciliation and don't let the fear of getting it wrong stop you from engaging with Indigenous cultures and issues.

[i] Deborah Hoger, "Avoiding the trap of cultural tokenism", Community Early Learning Australia, June 16, 2020, <https://www.cela.org.au/publications/amplify!-blog/june-2020/cultural-tokenism><https://www.cela.org.au/publications/amplify!-blog/june-2020/cultural-tokenism>, n.p.

[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, 16.

[iii] Gari Yala, 16.

[iv] Ibid.

[v] Summer May Finlay, "Where do you fit? Tokenistic, ally - or accomplice?", University of Wollongong Australia, June 1, 2020, <https://www.uow.edu.au/media/2020/where-do-you-fit-tokenistic-ally--or-accomplice.php>

[vi] Travis Akbar, "Tokenism happens but we need this to shift to representation and change", Indigenous X, <https://indigenoux.com.au/tokenism-happens-but-we-need-this-to-shift-to-representation-and-change/>
[<https://www.health.com/mind-body/health-diversity-inclusion/tokenism>

[vii] Hoger, "Avoiding the trap of cultural tokenism".

[viii] Ibid.

[ix] Narragunnawali, "Tackling Tokenism", Professional Learning, <https://www.narragunnawali.org.au/professional-learning/40/tackling-tokenism#tab-1>

[x] Kara Sherrer, "What is Tokenism, and Why Does it Matter in the Workplace?", Vanderbilt University, Feb 26, 2018, <https://business.vanderbilt.edu/news/2018/02/26/tokenism-in-the-workplace/>

[xi] Akbar, "Tokenism happens".

[xii] Narragunnawali, "Tackling Tokenism".