

Tokenism

Membership Toolkit

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 occurs when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, peoples, or issues are acknowledged in a superficial way, often to appear engaged rather than create real change.

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

Authenticity within an organisation is extremely important for First Nations staff. According to Indigenous employees, authenticity in the workplace is not common. The Gari Yala: Speak the Truth Report found that only 26% of First Nations employees feel that they work in a truly authentic organisation.

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. [iii]

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What Does Tokenism 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.” [iv]

Examples of Tokenism

Using Indigenous artwork, symbols, or language **without** context, permission, or attribution.

Hiring First Nations staff, but **failing** to accommodate for cultural responsibilities and unique experiences caused by colonisation (i.e. Sorry Business, frequent exposure to trauma).

Only engaging with Indigenous cultures, histories, and perspectives on specific days of the year such as NAIDOC, Sorry Day, and National Reconciliation Week.

Inviting Indigenous individuals to sit on boards or committees for **symbolic** representation, but ignoring or dismissing their input and contributions.

Directing all Indigenous-related work to a single Indigenous staff member or team, placing an **unfair** cultural load on them.

Including reconciliation language in plans and communications **without** shared decision-making, accountability, or follow-through.

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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.” [v]



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.

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.

How to Avoid Tokenism

- Start with intent: ask whether the action is designed to create impact or simply to be seen.
- Co-design actions with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, communities, and partners.
- Link each action clearly to the organisation’s vision for reconciliation and decision-making processes.
- Evaluate whether the action is meaningful, contextualised, and felt by community, not just visible internally.
- Treat reconciliation as an ongoing commitment, not just a one-off.

Questions to Ask

1. Is this action about appearance, or about genuine change?
2. Who benefits from this action, and how will that benefit be felt?
3. Was this developed in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?
4. Does this action connect clearly to reconciliation objectives?
5. Can this be delivered properly, without overpromising or underdelivering?

[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>.

[ii] Centre for Indigenous People & Work (Young, N., Gilbert, J., Evans, O. and O’Leary, J.) Gari Yala 2 (Speak the Truth): Centreing the Work Experiences of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Australians in 2025-2026, Sydney, CIPW.

[iii] Gari Yala 2

[iv] Deborah Hoger, “Avoiding the trap of cultural tokenism”

[v] Narragunnawali, “Tackling Tokenism”, Professional Learning, <https://www.narragunnawali.org.au/professional-learning/40/tackling-tokenism>.