4 GOVERNING THE ORGANISATION

Today, there are thousands of incorporated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations across the country.

Over the last 30 years, the duties and responsibilities of the governing bodies of these organisations have changed and grown more complex.

Here are some insights into practices of effective governing bodies.

GOVERNING BODIES: WHAT THEY ARE AND WHAT THEY DO

A governing body could be a board, a council, a steering committee, an assembly of elders or traditional owners, or a selection of extended families or clans.

A governing body is the group of people given the power and authority to form the policy and steer the overall direction of an organisation. Its members can be elected to that position of power by voting, or selected through nomination by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander decision-making processes. It is the collective unit that makes and implements decisions on behalf of its members and the organisation.

The primary job of the governing body is to protect the rights, interests and wellbeing of all the members on whose behalf the organisation is working.

The governing body as a whole does this by making sure the organisation runs smoothly and can achieve the goals and objectives it has promised to deliver to its members.

ACCOUNTABILITY

To be accountable means:

* to **answer** for your actions and t**ake responsibility** for your mistakes
* to **be responsible** to another
* to be **able to explain** what happened.

As representatives, the governing body must be able to speak on behalf of, protect the rights and interests of, and be accountable to all members.

The **basics of accountability** include having:

* governance policies and procedures
* planning and performance reporting processes
* clearly identified roles, responsibilities and delegations
* transparent ways of making and implementing decisions that members regard as legitimate
* good communication

Decision making by the governing body

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, decision are usually made through extensive collective discussion and consultation, and open to ongoing negotiation. This is called consensus decision making. Consensus decision making is possible within an organisational setting, with a skilled chair facilitating.

A decision must be made collectively by a quorum of the governing body. Informed decisions are essential.

TIPS An informed decision is one that is:

Transparent	Members and outsiders can follow the process and the reasons behind it.
Well considered	It is based on sound information and inclusive consultation.
Consistent	It is consistent with a set of agreed values, rules or principles.
Lawful	People should record their dissent if a decision is illegal or may lead to insolvency.
Actioned	The decision is implemented and followed through.
Building capacity	It is made with increasing confidence through practice, experience and increased skills.

Governing finances and resources

The governing body is responsible for managing the funds, resources and assets of the organisation. Such resources are scarce and critical to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' future development. So they need to be well managed.

A strong governing body should:

- always ask its top manager the hard questions about money issues
- expect to get accurate information and straightforward answers back from the top manager
- make an effort to understand the way the 'money business' of the organisation works
- make informed decisions on the basis of information from the top manager and the members.

Communicating

Your members and stakeholders need a clear view of how the organisation is going and what the plans are for its future. Members also need regular opportunities to have their say.

Sound governance decisions also depend on receiving enough honest, reliable, clear information to be able to assess risks and make an informed choice.

Future planning

Organisations that plan ahead can usually survive conflict and major changes. They are also better at keeping new plans going, sustaining economic development, and reliably delivering services and support to their members and communities.

Strategic planning is a collective process. It's a way of looking ahead to where you want to be and how you're going to get there. It's about the really big things you want to achieve for your members.

A governance development and action plan is a type of strategic plan, but focuses on setting out your specific plan of attack, your best options, and solutions and

tactics for achieving the governance goals of your nation, community or organisation. See the Indigenous Governance Toolkit for steps, tips and tools for developing your own governance plan.

CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT

Governing bodies will need support to develop capacity and confidence to effectively undertake its roles and responsibilities. The most successful approach to building governance capacity is one that:

- becomes part of the daily routine of your organisation
- builds on your existing strengths and knowledge
- relates to specific conditions and local problems that need to be solved
- is carried out on the job so that understanding is embedded in practice
- is based around identifying culturally legitimate solutions for governance problems
- includes role-play and problem-solving scenarios that enable solutions to be practised and refined.

Disputes and complaints

Conflicts of views between people and complaints about how things are done are common to every organisation.

Conflict may occur:

- within the membership of a nation, community or organisation
- within an organisation's own governing body, staff and management
- between organisations or leaders
- between a group and an organisation
- with external stakeholders or other parties.

An effective organisation has ways to deal with complaints and mediate disputes. Clearly defining roles and responsibilities within the organisation, including within the governing body, is key. Strong policies and procedures that are well understood, respected and consistently enforced is also critical both for prevention and effective intervention.

For more information, please see the Indigenous Governance Toolkit: **toolkit.aigi.com.au**

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