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## Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership

Leadership is the art of motivating people towards a common goal or to 'get things done'. It's also about providing guidance and direction.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership has different values and criteria than in wider Australian society. For example:

- it is often shared among people with different responsibilities for different matters
- there are important age and gender dimensions
- it is based on accumulating knowledge and experience.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders have preserved ancient laws, traditions, and knowledge for tens of thousands of years. Leadership is often networked, with different leaders for different extended families, clans, kinship groups, and nations.

### Cultural leadership roles

Culture is at the heart of all effective Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership. Cultural leaders play an integral role in sharing and strengthening cultural knowledge.

There can be different cultural leaders for different cultural purposes, including ceremonial bosses, Elders and traditional healers.

### Effective leadership

Effective leaders act according to shared cultural values, are accountable and inclusive, understand their responsibilities, inspire others, and recognise their strengths and weaknesses.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders are often expected to:

- have a high level of cultural understanding
- be respected in their local and wider community
- communicate with community members in a culturally appropriate way.
- speak on behalf of the 'right' people (mob or land-owning group) about the 'right' issues (their own Country and business)
- be accountable to their community and maintain legitimacy through their actions.

### Leadership challenges

Key challenges that leaders face include:

#### Balancing multiple needs

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders can face challenges balancing responsibilities to their families and communities with obligations to their group and stakeholders.

Leaders must navigate non-Indigenous wider environments, which may conflict with cultural values and leadership principles.

#### Change, crisis and conflict

Leaders must adapt and respond to change, crises, and conflicts to ensure the resilience and self-determination of



their groups. It's important they develop specific strategies to manage any challenges, while maintaining continuity.

## Develop your leadership

5 methods to support leadership development include:

### Governance and professional skills training

- Leaders should participate in relevant workshops, courses, conferences, and networks. Training may cover financial literacy, decision-making, negotiations, leadership, and cultural protocols.

### Professional development strategies

- Support internal training, encourage learning from external organisations, and address skill gaps.
- Reserve management positions for staff career progression.
- Offer online governance programs and support diploma-level certifications.

### Informal processes

- Provide on-the-job training, experiential learning, and informal information sharing.
- Include future leaders and provide experiential learning through leadership positions.

### Mentoring

- Establish formal and informal mentoring.
- Support youth appointments and employ permanent organisational mentors.

### Tertiary training

- Support attendance at universities, TAFE, or Registered Training organisations.
- Offer subsidies, study leave, quiet study spaces, and scholarships for staff qualifications.

## Succession planning

Succession planning is about ensuring you have experienced and well-trained leaders for the future.

Leaders today need to mentor and develop the leaders of tomorrow. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies have long practised rules and processes to transmit knowledge, skills, and experience to the next generation of leaders.

## Succession planning tips

1. Be proactive and plan
2. Pinpoint succession candidates
3. Let them know and explain the stages
4. Step up professional development efforts
5. Trial your succession plan
6. Think about your own successor

## Building leadership capabilities in young people

Building capabilities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people helps them feel skilled and confident to take up leadership roles.

Some strategies for supporting the leadership and capability development of young people include:

- mentoring
- youth engagement initiatives
- formal training.

## The transition between generations

It takes time for young people to gain experience, skills, authority, and to step into leadership roles.

It also takes trust and confidence, from both current leaders and the community. The invitation for young people to take on leadership roles must be accompanied by dedicated and ongoing support.

## Honour Elder leaders

It's important to balance the need for leadership renewal with respect and recognition of Elder leaders.

The transition of leaders from one generation to the next needs to be done with sensitivity.

When you lose a leader you lose important knowledge, experience and skills. Remember that young leaders stand on the shoulders of Elders.

## Evaluate your leadership

Taking the time to reflect on and evaluate your leadership helps you identify areas for improvement, encourage discussion and get people involved in leadership issues.



For more information,  
visit: [aigi.org.au/toolkit](https://aigi.org.au/toolkit) or  
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