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## Your culture

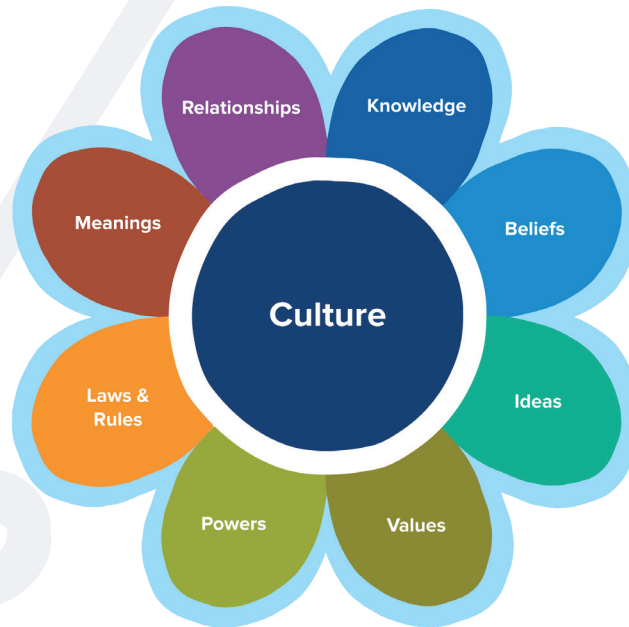
Culture is the collective beliefs, values, rules and customs that inform a group's way of life.

Every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander group has a unique culture. However there are some important cultural features that groups share. These include:

- **networked systems of kinship and family support**
- **deep connection to Country**
- **value of ceremony, traditions and ritual**
- **respect for law and the authority of Elders**
- **respect for women's and men's areas of knowledge**
- **mutual responsibility and sharing of resources.**

Culture is a source of strength, identity, and healing. It allows individuals to connect with others in their group and their wider environment. Culture shapes people's perspectives, values, wants, and needs. In this way, culture is the foundation of your governance. It is important to consider what role you want it to play.

### Key elements of culture



**Values.** The core principles that your group believes to be important. The values of your group inform and influence the way you govern.

**Laws and rules.** Laws and rules structure how groups organise, exercise, and control power. They influence the actions your group takes to get things done.

Your group must consider both Indigenous and non-Indigenous laws and rules to effectively practice two-way governance.

**Relationships.** For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, relationships define how people work together.

Relationships help clarify who should take on certain roles and responsibilities in a group, including who should be involved, and who should lead and make decisions.

**Meanings.** Meanings are the shared understandings, values or beliefs that people associate with words, concepts or expressions. Meanings help to explain their significance or purpose.

Shared meanings make it easier for groups to assert their rights when working with external stakeholders.

**Knowledge.** A system of information, beliefs, and understandings about the world.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have protected and passed down traditional knowledge for generations. Culture evolves as new generations add new information and ideas to knowledge.

**Ideas.** The thoughts, opinions or beliefs a person has about something, that can lead to a possible course of action.

Different groups may have different ideas of what effective governance is. As long as ideas are shared and accepted within your group, governance is likely to be seen as culturally legitimate.

**Beliefs.** The ideas, worldviews or convictions people understand to be true. Beliefs inform how groups run and interact with their wider environment.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, shared beliefs have existed and been passed through generations for many thousands of years. For example, Creation stories or Dreaming stories.

**Powers.** In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups, power refers to the:

- extent of acknowledged legal, jurisdictional and cultural authority
- capacity to make decisions, exercise laws, resolve disputes and carry out administration.

Governance is considered culturally legitimate when governance structures and leadership align with group members' ideas on exercising power.

## Key principles for culture-smart governance include:

**Cultural legitimacy:** reflecting values and rules of your people, preserving cultural knowledge, and creating a culturally safe environment.

**Networks:** engaging with family, kin, traditional owners, Elders, and Country, and incorporating their responsibilities and systems of authority.

**Connection to Country:** embedding connection to Country in governance values, prioritising being on Country, and sharing customary knowledge.

**Governing power:** having control over decisions, rules, disputes, and administration, formalising governing powers, and maximising autonomy.

**Local control:** involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in decisions and actions that affect them and creating flexible governance structures.

**Capability:** building skills and expertise through training and development opportunities for those involved in governance.

**Leadership:** representing local interests, respecting cultural authority, and creating succession planning frameworks.

## Culturally legitimate governance

Governance arrangements are culturally legitimate when they:

- are informed by cultural traditions, laws, rules and practices
- embody the values and norms that are important to you and your people today
- reflect your people's contemporary ideas about how power and authority should be shared
- are generated through your people's own decisions and efforts
- are effectively and properly put into practice.

When your group's governance reflects the culture of your members, they are more likely to be invested in its success.

Cultural legitimacy creates a positive cycle: groups work more effectively for their members, members feel more supported, and external stakeholders see your group as more credible.

## Principles for culture-smart governance

Being 'culture-smart' means producing governance. There are many ways groups customise their ways of working to achieve culture-smart governance.

## Culture-smart governance

Being 'culture-smart' means producing governance solutions that strengthen cultural ways of doing things.

Culture-smart governance solutions are ones that:

- are considered and determined locally
- capture your people's cultural priorities and vision for the future
- resonate with their cultural values, standards, and rules
- are practically effective in your local and wider environments
- meet the expectations of your local members and your external stakeholders.

Culture-smart governance recognises that culture is a governance strength, not a problem.



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