CLOSING THE GAP
ENGAGING WITH ABORIGINAL AND
TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER AUSTRALIANS

Issues to keep in mind – Part 1

Cultural awareness

Indigenous, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

- It is preferable to use the terms ‘Aboriginal’ or ‘Torres Strait Islander’ when referring to the original inhabitants of Australia.
- Acronyms for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should not be used.

Criteria used to define Aboriginality

- A person must be of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander descent
- A person must identify as an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person, and
- A person must be accepted as an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person by the community in which they live.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags

- The Aboriginal flag was designed in 1971 by Harold Thomas. The black represents the Aboriginal people, the red represents the earth and their spiritual relationship to the land, and the yellow represents the sun, the giver of life.
- The Torres Strait Islander flag is attributed to the late Bernard Namok of Thursday Island. The flag is emblazoned with a white dari (headdress) which is a symbol of Torres Strait Islanders. The white five pointed star beneath it symbolises the five major island groups and the navigational importance of stars to these seafaring people. The green stripes represent the land, the black stripes represent the people, and the blue the sea. The flag as a whole symbolises the unity of all Torres Strait Islanders.
- In July 1995, both flags were proclaimed as official flags in Section 5 of the Flags Act 1953.
- At events at which flags are shown, the order of display, from an audience perspective from left to right should be: the Australian flag, the relevant State or Territory flag, the Aboriginal flag and the Torres Strait Islander flag.

Family and kinship

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have strong family values and an extended family structure. The concepts of extended family and ‘community as family’ in Aboriginal communities encompass the idea that children are not just the concern of the biological parents, but of the entire community. The raising, care, education and discipline of children are the responsibility of everyone – male, female, young and old.
- Kinship systems define where a person fits into the community. Kinship defines the roles and responsibilities for raising and educating children and also structures systems of moral and financial support within the community.
Diversity

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are as diverse as any other community.
- It is important when engaging with communities to be aware of the customs and lores of the people or community you are working with and engage with them in a way that is relevant to them.

Acknowledgment of land and original custodians

- An Acknowledgement of Country is a way of showing awareness of and respect for the traditional Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander owners of the land on which a meeting or event is being held, and of recognising the continuing connection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to their country.
- When holding a meeting, event or conference, it is respectful and good practice to acknowledge the land on which you are meeting and its original custodians at the start of the gathering:

  ‘I would like to acknowledge the original custodians, the xyz people, on whose land we are meeting today. I would also like to pay my respects to elders past and present, and welcome all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples here with us today’.

Welcome to Country

- A Welcome to Country is a ceremony performed by Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people to welcome visitors to their traditional land. It can take many forms, depending on the particular culture of the traditional owners. It can include singing, dancing, smoking ceremonies or a speech in traditional language or English.
- A Welcome to Country ceremony should only be performed by the traditional owners. Steps should be taken to ensure that an appropriate Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander representative is invited to undertake the ceremony.

Traditional owners

- Traditional owners are the first inhabitants of the area where the meeting takes place.

Elders

- An elder is a member of the community who is respected and has the authority of the community to give permission and advice, and to disclose cultural knowledge and beliefs.
- Whilst elders are often older members of the community, this is not always the case.
- When negotiating with a community, you should try to ensure that recognised elders of that community are involved, either directly or indirectly.
- Depending on the issue that you wish to address, you may also need to include other interest groups and organisations within the community.

Men’s and women’s business

- In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture certain customs and practices are performed by men and women separately, often referred to as men’s and women’s business.
- It may be appropriate when engaging with communities to conduct discussions separately with men and women.

Other information sheets in the series

- Issues to keep in mind – Part 2 Visiting communities
- Steps for engaging effectively to work together and build productive partnerships
- The engagement spectrum
- What are the principles underpinning effective engagement?
- What is good engagement?