

# VALUING AND STRENGTHENING

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Workforce



A guide to promote supportive working  
environments in health and human services

**FOR ORGANISATIONS AND MANAGERS**



We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the traditional custodians of the land and seas of Australia. We recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' cultural, spiritual, physical and emotional connection with their lands and seas. We pay our respects to all Elders past, present and emerging. We specifically acknowledge all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who participated in this research and offer thanks for welcoming us onto their land.

The image on the front cover reflects the unity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce and their diversity of knowledge. It was conceptualised by the Aboriginal-led research team and designed by CoLLECT Design.

Illustrations by Zahra Zainal for Digital Storytellers  
Designed by CoLLECT Design [www.collectdesign.com.au](http://www.collectdesign.com.au)

A guide to promote supportive working environments for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce in health and human services.



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# ABOUT THIS BOOKLET

**This resource has been informed by an Aboriginal-led research project which gathered the views and experiences of the national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and human services workforce.**



## EXPLORING WORKFORCE EXPERIENCES

Over 100 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers in health and human services participated in the research. The research was conducted in regional, remote and metropolitan settings as well as across government, not-for-profit and Aboriginal community controlled organisations.

Workforce yarned about challenges they experience in their workplaces and the ways in which they stay strong. Findings were shared with a large group of experts (leaders, managers, workforce) who then identified strategies to promote supportive and respectful workplaces.

## IS THIS GUIDE FOR YOU?

This guide is for managers and team leaders, to assist them to reflect on workplace practices and ways in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff can be supported. Every organisation and manager is different.

Together with your staff, you can tailor the strategies in this booklet according to your organisation's needs.

## HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide is a starting point to prompt you to think creatively about how you support and value your workforce. It shares the learnings from the perspective of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce, and if implemented, will positively influence your whole organisation. You may like to reflect on the strategies put forward here during senior management meetings, when creating a workforce strategy, at performance appraisals (your own and your staff) and at team meetings.

## A COMPANION GUIDE

Sharing our Ways of Staying Strong – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Workforce, is a companion document to this resource. That booklet is a guide which can be shared and distributed amongst staff in your organisation.

# WHO ARE THE ABORIGINAL & TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER WORKFORCE?

**We are distinct and unique, representing the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and communities in Australia.**



We come from all over the country and carry valuable local knowledge about being, doing, thinking and connecting to community – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways.

## COMMUNITY AND CULTURE MATTERS

In health and human services roles, we bring our unique lived experiences and knowledge about culture and community. This enables us to provide appropriate and respectful services to our people. As Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, working for our community is a big deal and for many of us, it's what gets us going every day.

## OUR SHARED HISTORY

It is important to understand that as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people we are all different and we carry different histories. These histories are not only ours, they are yours too. The shared history of our nation continues to

impact us and our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Being aware of these histories and continuing impacts is important; we appreciate it when our colleagues take the time to learn.

Despite our traumatic history, we maintain our connection to culture, language and Country and this is our strength. Connecting with our people at work to share stories and support one another helps us stay strong. What is important is feeling valued by the workplace for our community and cultural knowledge and our cultural ways of working.

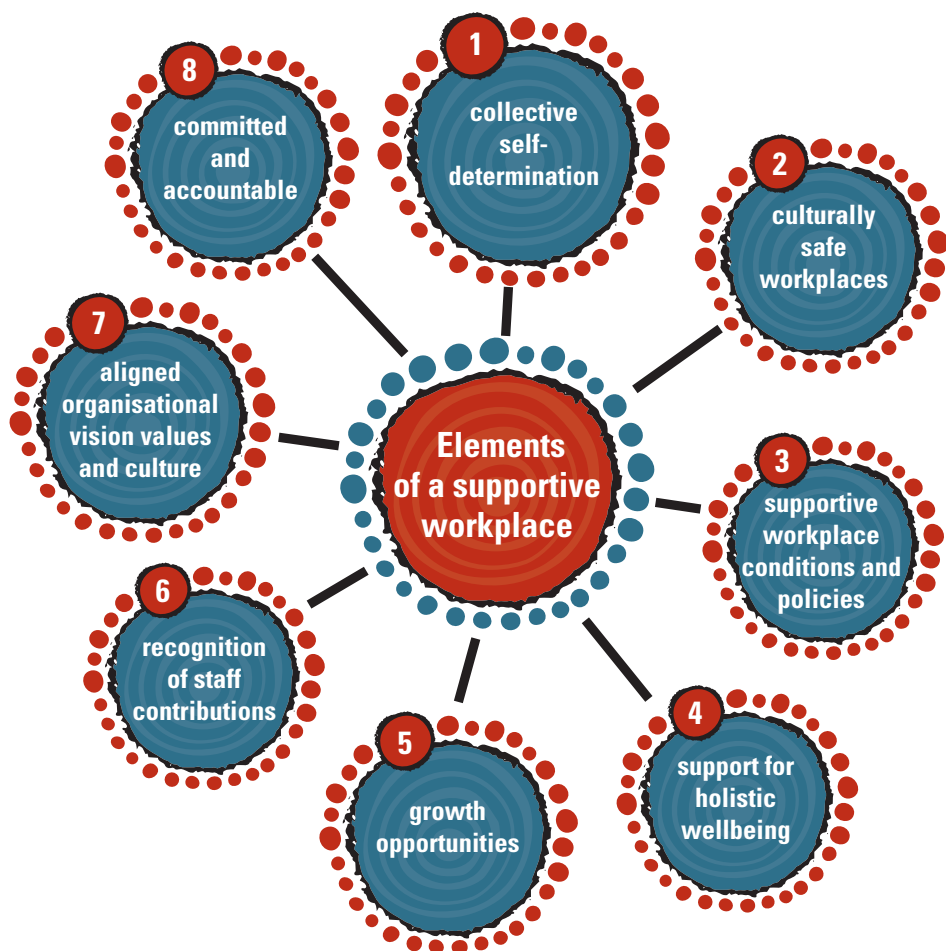
## MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have always contributed to the workforce, both paid and unpaid. Having us at the face of service delivery is the only way to engage our community, build trust, and achieve positive outcomes.

Our voices are threaded throughout this resource. We want to share our stories with you to encourage hard conversations about the challenges we face and what we need to stay strong at work. This resource can help to create supportive workplaces and working conditions for everyone so we can work together to make a real difference for our people.

# BUILDING A SUPPORTIVE WORKPLACE

Ways of building and maintaining supportive workplace environments that strengthen and value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce.



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# COLLECTIVE SELF-DETERMINATION

Self-determination is important to us as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce, so that we are in control of decisions affecting our communities. It means that we can make a real difference for our people, ensuring that services are provided in a culturally safe way.

We recommend the following:

- Representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff at all levels within organisations, including growth opportunities to develop the necessary leadership skills.
- Opportunities to create our own structures and ways of working and to have a voice at the decision-making table.
- Establish cultural governance mechanisms that are formalised, adequately resourced and endorsed by the executive of the organisation.

WE HAVE SIGNIFICANT  
ABORIGINAL  
LEADERSHIP



CREATE OUR  
OWN  
STRUCTURES



A SEAT AT  
DECISION-MAKING  
TABLE



# CULTURALLY SAFE WORKPLACES

Everyone wants to feel safe at work. For us as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce, this doesn't just mean physical and personal safety, it also includes our cultural safety. As an employer, you play an important role in providing a culturally safe place to work.



## WHAT DOES CULTURAL SAFETY MEAN IN YOUR ORGANISATION?

Getting cultural safety right is important and requires careful consideration. As an organisation, you may reflect on the following:

- The terminology and concepts that fit your organisation (eg: cultural awareness, cultural safety, cultural competency, cultural fitness). Which concept best suits your organisation and the work you do?
- The actions that individuals and teams can take to centre Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of working (outcome = cultural safety).
- Understanding what cultural harm looks like too (eg: when gender roles and responsibilities are not respected).
- Whether cultural safety could be incorporated as a code of conduct.



## BRINGING THE CULTURE INTO CULTURAL SAFETY

Engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is important. Listen to the community and let them guide you. A good way to do this is to establish a paid advisory group to guide you on cultural ways of working and cultural protocols (eg: best ways to incorporate culture, appropriate language, ways of acknowledging Elders, young people).





## HOW DO ORGANISATIONS DEMONSTRATE CULTURAL SAFETY?

Here are some ideas:

- Operate in a way that respects cultural ways of working and values the principles of self-determination (our way, our choice).
- Consult and collaborate with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to ensure the work of the organisation is relevant and focused on community priorities and needs.
- Position Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff in leadership and decision-making roles.
- Practice cultural protocols during events and staff meetings (eg: Welcome to Country, Acknowledgement of Country and smoking ceremonies). Consider how all staff are involved, contribute or take initiative.
  - How do you ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff are not overburdened with these tasks?
  - Are non-Indigenous staff encouraged to take initiative too?
- Organise or attend NAIDOC celebrations, Apology day lunches, Reconciliation Week events. Encourage all staff to attend.
- Demonstrate an appreciation of and respect for the cultural responsibilities and obligations experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff (eg: kinship structures, cultural obligations, community responsibilities, native title obligations).
- Determine how breaches of cultural safety by staff, clients, partner organisations or others will be addressed in your organisation.



CULTURAL FITNESS

PRACTICE  
YOUR CULTURAL  
AWARENESS!



LINE MANAGER  
SHOULD ADDRESS  
PEER COMMENTS

## CULTURAL SAFETY TRAINING

When you are deciding upon facilitators and modes of providing cultural safety training, consider the following:

- What content does the training cover?
  - Does it have a specific health or human services focus?
  - Is the training ongoing or one-off, mandatory or optional?
  - Is the training online, face-to-face or on-Country?
  - To what extent is institutional/systemic racism addressed in the training?
- Note: this includes exploring power, biases and privilege, and providing understandings of unconscious biases.*
- How is the quality of the training promoted and measured?

**REGULAR &  
MANDATORY**  
CULTURAL AWARENESS  
TRAINING



As a workforce, we think it's important that cultural safety training is mandatory, regular and delivered face-to-face for new as well as existing staff. Is this possible in your workplace?



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# SUPPORTIVE WORKPLACE CONDITIONS AND POLICIES

**Workplaces can provide a supportive and enabling environment through both conditions and policies.**

Here are some of the ways this could happen in your organisation:

## INCORPORATE ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER WAYS OF WORKING

Consider how your work practices are centred around cultural ways of doing business and are responsive to community needs. Is there support from non-Indigenous colleagues who are culturally competent and understand Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways?

**FORMALISE**  
*flexible POLICY*  
(WHICH REFLECT  
KINSHIP STRUCTURES)

## CO-DESIGN JOB DESCRIPTIONS

It may be appropriate to co-design Job Descriptions with your staff with an agreed set of expectations and deliverables that incorporate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of working.

## CLARIFY EXPECTATIONS



## FAIR REMUNERATION

Consider how professional expertise as well as cultural knowledge and community connections are acknowledged through fair remuneration within employment contracts. Reflect on the wage parity that exists between different roles in your organisation (eg: Aboriginal Health Practitioners and Registered Nurses). Also reflect on the employment security you are providing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff.

## FLEXIBILITY FOR FAMILY AND STUDY

Consider how the organisation can support staff with family and study commitments. This might include study leave and flexible work arrangements.

## SUPPORTIVE WORKPLACE CONDITIONS AND POLICIES (cont.)



### HARNESSING SUPPORT FROM COLLEAGUES

- Consult with your Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce to understand their peer support needs.
- Provide opportunities for staff to work in supportive and culturally safe teams.
- Provide support to attend forums or gatherings with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander colleagues, particularly for staff in non-Indigenous organisations (such as government bodies).
- Promote peer support through debriefing opportunities and collaborative working conditions.
- Remind managers, teams and all staff of their duty of care to look after each other.
- Consider the possibility of establishing a leave exchange system where staff can donate leave to colleagues in need.

### PROVIDING PROFESSIONAL SUPPORTS AND ENCOURAGING SELF-CARE

- Engage with staff to understand what they consider appropriate and supportive in relation to formal supports (eg: professional cultural mentoring services, counselling, employee assistance programs). It is paramount that these are provided in a culturally appropriate and genuine manner.
- Encourage staff to look after themselves with self-care (refer to the Workforce companion document to understand how your staff can do this).

### COLLEAGUES DUTY OF CARE



### MANAGING SELF-CARE



## MANAGING CONCERNS

- Clearly outline what rights and responsibilities staff, management and the organisation have in relation to reporting and managing any concerns.
- Establish clear policies regarding what is and what isn't appropriate that outline formal and informal complaint, grievance and mediation processes.
- Ensure your Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff are supported during these processes, such as having a nominated support person present.
- Seek the expertise of an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander consultant to support your HR team to navigate processes in a culturally safe and appropriate way.



## SUPPORTIVE WORKPLACE CONDITIONS AND POLICIES (cont)

### HAVE YOU THOUGHT ABOUT YOUR RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION STRATEGIES?

How do your Human Resources (HR) staff and practices positively influence the recruitment and retention of your Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and the cultural safety of your organisation?



#### Your organisation might like to:

- Employ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in HR to design culturally safe HR processes and promote the cultural safety of the organisation.
- Understand that humility is central to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. During interviews, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander candidates are likely to understate their experience and be more likely to pass credit to others. Reflect on your recruitment strategies and how culturally appropriate they are.
- Reflect on how cultural competency is assessed during recruitment of non-Indigenous workforce. Is cultural competency listed as an Essential Criteria in Job Descriptions and assessed during interviews?
- Consider the workforce retention strategies you have in place and the supports you provide to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff. For example:
  - What supports are provided for those working in isolation?
  - How can you enable your workforce to frequently connect with other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?

HOW ARE CULTURAL  
COMPETENCIES  
BEING MEASURED?



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## SUPPORT FOR HOLISTIC WELLBEING

**Holistic wellbeing includes social, emotional, cultural and physical wellbeing. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, collective wellbeing is an additional element.**

Checking in with your staff regularly (eg: weekly or fortnightly yarns, whatever suits you and your organisation) is a good way to understand their holistic wellbeing needs. You could also consider annual organisation-wide wellbeing audits/surveys.

Encourage your staff to practice self-care (you might also like to refer your staff to the Workforce companion document ). The table on the following page highlights a range of strategies to promote holistic wellbeing.

RESILIENCE &  
WELLBEING



Aboriginal Health is defined within the Constitution of the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO): 'Aboriginal Health' means not just the physical wellbeing of an individual but refers to the social, emotional and cultural wellbeing of the whole Community in which each individual is able to achieve their full potential as a human being thereby bringing about the total wellbeing of their Community.



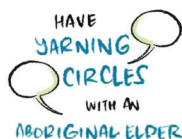
Here are some of the ways your organisation can support the holistic wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce:

### CULTURAL WELLBEING

Respect and value the cultural knowledge and community connections of your staff.

Weave Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of working into workplace practices.

Provide cultural mentoring opportunities and safe spaces to connect eg: for yarning circles with Elders.



Understand what community connections mean for your Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff.

Recognise the cultural and community obligations of staff, such as supporting staff to attend community events.

### SOCIAL WELLBEING

Support attendance at external networking events.

COME TOGETHER  
IF YOU HAVE SKIN IN  
THE GAME



Host annual or bi-annual forums to connect staff working in different departments across large organisations. Gatherings could be on Country (eg: at places of cultural significance).

LOCAL & REGIONAL  
WORKSHOPS



AWAY FROM  
WORK

PRIVATE SAFE SPACES  
FOR SHARING WITH  
OUR CULTURAL FAMILIES

Establish virtual support networks when face-to-face isn't possible.



EXTERNAL  
ORGANISATIONS

granny's groups    unions

### PHYSICAL WELLBEING

Understand the impact of workplace stress on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff who may be managing complex and/or chronic health conditions.

Support the physical wellbeing of staff, such as onsite gyms, subsidised gym membership, walking groups.



Protect the physical safety of your workforce (eg: through policies to ensure home visits are undertaken in teams).



## EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

Understand how grief, loss and trauma impact your staff. Take into account that many clients have complex needs and are family or kin. This contributes to the emotional load experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff.

Offer culturally appropriate supports, such as traditional healers, counselling, Employee Assistance Programs.

### ACCESS TO TRADITIONAL HEALTH SERVICES



Be mindful of the emotional load, community responsibilities and cultural obligations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff. Redistribute tasks, manage peer and workplace expectations, and provide flexibility as necessary.

## COLLECTIVE WELLBEING

Understand the importance of connecting and sharing knowledge for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff.

Provide opportunities for staff to support one another (eg: by sharing the load through debriefing).



As a team, determine an agreed strategy around sharing concerns and identifying solutions. Be open to having hard conversations and asking tough questions.

Know and understand what bullying is and actively promote respectful relationships, such as lateral love/violence workshops.



**Upskilling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce benefits both the workforce and clients of your organisation.**

\$75K SCHOLARSHIPS



UPSKILLING



Here are some recommended approaches for building the capacity of your Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff:

### FORMAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce with lived experience and community knowledge can benefit from support within the workplace to gain formal qualifications. Provide opportunities for staff to develop and understand what the barriers might be to achieving this.

### CULTURAL MENTORING

Consider how the cultural knowledge of your workforce can be strengthened and supported through workshops, cultural mentoring or yarning circles with Elders.

### PROFESSIONAL SUPERVISION

Provide opportunities for professional supervision so that staff can develop in their roles.

PROFESSIONAL  
DEVELOPMENT  
+ CULTURAL  
SUPERVISION

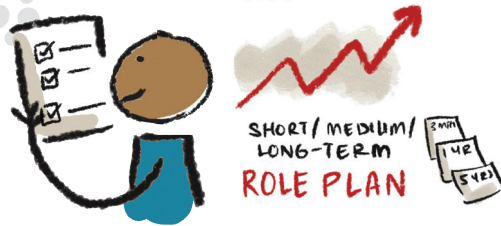


### BUDDY SYSTEMS

Set up buddy systems so that workforce can receive guidance from and provide guidance to colleagues. These relationships are essential in providing support and strength in dealing with challenges in the workplace and sharing strengths.

### CAREER PATHWAYS AND SUCCESSION PLANNING

Identify what pathways are available or can be created for staff to grow within the organisation, including succession planning.



## GOAL-SETTING

Consider how goal-setting and career planning can be incorporated into performance reviews:

- Include short, medium and long-term goal-setting. Factor in discussions around future study, future roles, or retirement planning.
- Consider how to factor in goal-setting for short-term contract workers.
- Promote individual goal-setting aligned with organisational vision and values.

## LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

Consider how your organisation provides staff with leadership experiences. When providing opportunities for growth, reflect on actions that could be tokenistic and potentially harmful despite good intentions.

Ensure staff have the required skill set or the necessary supports, and provide transitions such as shadowing other managers to build capacity and confidence.

Moving or relocating for work and travelling for training and education is often a challenge, particularly because many of us have to manage child care arrangements and other caring responsibilities. Think about how training opportunities incorporate family responsibilities (eg: bringing kids along on study blocks and child care provisions).



## RECOGNITION OF STAFF CONTRIBUTIONS

**It is important to recognise the unique strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and what they bring to their roles. Empowering and trusting workforce is vital to building confidence.**

Recognise and formalise the cultural mentorship your Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff provide to non-Indigenous colleagues.

This can be formalised within the Job Description. Alternatively, you could consider bringing in external cultural mentors to remove this burden from staff.

Acknowledge where your staff rely on their community connections as an important aspect of their role. Give thought to the way your staff build and maintain these community connections, including supporting your staff to attend community events, funerals and sorry business.

RECOGNISE THE  
UN-RECOGNISED  
MAKE IT PART OF THE  
ROLE!



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# ALIGNED ORGANISATIONAL VISION, VALUES AND CULTURE

Reflect on the organisation's **vision**, **values** and **culture** that foster an accountable workplace environment for collective self-determination, cultural safety, supportive workplace conditions, holistic health, celebration of staff contributions, and growth opportunities for your Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff.

Here are some things to think about:

## ORGANISATIONAL VISION

- Whilst this may have been established some time ago, reflect on what the organisation's vision or mission statement means to you as a team (collectively) and each of the members of your team (individually).
- Think through how the employment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce aligns with this vision.

## ORGANISATIONAL VALUES

- Consider how your organisation's values promote respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce and clients.
- If your workplace is committed to improving the health and social outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, what value do you place on the staff that enable you to realise this vision?

- How is the lived experience, professional qualifications and cultural knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff valued and harnessed?
- What are your personal values and beliefs – how will you as a person bring these to your work every day?

## ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

Organisational culture is influenced by the organisation's vision and values and also by the people who make up your workforce. In this way, organisational culture is a dynamic and living thing that evolves and changes. All staff can contribute to a positive organisational culture.

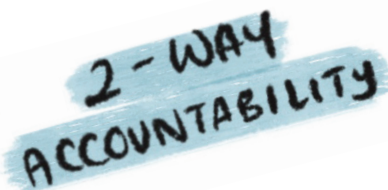
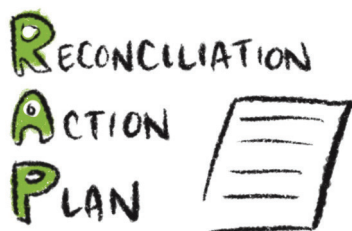
- Are you employing people whose personal values align with your organisational culture?
- How are you empowering staff to contribute to a positive and supportive organisational culture and team culture?
- Recognise the importance of collective unity by supporting all staff to organise or attend NAIDOC celebrations, Apology day lunches, Reconciliation Week events (or hosting one as an organisation without overburdening your Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff).

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## (COMMITTED AND ACCOUNTABLE

**Formalise your commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and communities by considering the following:**

- Record your commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce and communities through developing a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) or progressing your current RAP to the next level.
- Ensure there is an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice influencing your leadership teams. This could be done by employing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance panel to inform policies and strategies.
- Design and implement an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce strategy (that includes recruitment and retention strategies, growth opportunities, leadership pathways) and link this to your strategic plan.
- Report on the recruitment and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff in your annual report.



# TIME TO REFLECT

## ELEMENTS OF A SUPPORTIVE WORKPLACE



Plan strategies to implement in the workplace:

Three sticky notes for planning implementation strategies:

- Today** (pink note, top left)
- Next Week** (yellow note, top right)
- Next Month** (white note, bottom)



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