# Employer Guide: Creating inclusive workplaces

A practical guide for employers to support First Nations participation in the decarbonisation sector

## Disclaimer

## Artwork story

This artwork is a story that incorporates the project First Nations Engagement in the Transition to Net Zero. It represents the various pathways First Nations people might take to find their feet in a secure workforce.

Each step of the way – from starting out, to becoming successful and eventually guiding the younger generations – is a journey in itself.

Firstly, people will hear about a job and decide if it is right for them. If this is the path they'd like to take, the next step of this journey is getting skilled up and landing the job. Once the job is secured, they will settle in and ultimately grow and thrive, in order to eventually teach new ones coming through.

Each pathway and section of the design has plenty of community symbols. This represents the support of those who are encouraging and helping to build confidence for these First Nations peoples.

## About the artist – Kirralee Costelloe

My name is Kirralee Costelloe, and I am a proud Mandandanji / Noonuccal Woman who was born and raised in Rockhampton, Queensland. My art journey started about 7 years ago when I decided to carry on my Elder's legacy of painting and create my own, for my people, for my family and for myself. I thrive when I'm meeting new people in my community and having the opportunities to teach them about my story, while also creating art for them in many different ways.

# Contents

# Introduction

The Australian Government is working to accelerate the development of clean energy and decarbonisation-related skills and capabilities to support Australia's transition to net zero. As part of this, increasing the participation of First Nations peoples in the decarbonisation workforce has been identified as a priority.

To inform this work, the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) engaged Ninti One Limited to research the opportunities and barriers for First Nations peoples in accessing training and employment in the decarbonisation workforce. This research also assessed existing cultural safety measures and identified practical opportunities to create safer, more supportive environments for First Nations learners and workers.

Ninti's research involved extensive engagement with First Nations communities, organisations, employers, training providers and government stakeholders, with more than 100 consultations conducted nationally.

The project findings are designed to inform the development of tools and resources that will help industry, training providers and government better support First Nations participation in Australia's future decarbonisation workforce.

This guide supports the objective identified in the Australian Government First Nations Clean Energy Strategy 2024-30 (the Strategy) to grow the clean energy workforce, including the priority actions to:

- Coordinate First Nations clean energy workforce development
- Improve First Nations workforce readiness
- Develop a First Nations clean energy job guide.

The Strategy was developed through extensive engagement with more than 1,200 people across Australia, including First Nations peoples, industry, government and non-government organisations.

# About this guide

This guide is a practical resource for employers in the decarbonisation sector who want to take meaningful action to support First Nations workforce participation. It is designed for those involved in workforce strategy, recruitment, procurement, governance, and project delivery and provides guidance on how to create culturally safe, inclusive, and community-connected workplaces.

The content is grounded in the lived experiences and insights of First Nations stakeholders and shaped by extensive engagement with industry, community, and government. It complements broader national strategies by focusing specifically on what employers can do, not just why change is needed. You can use this guide to:

- Review and strengthen current organisational practices to enhance cultural safety
- Identify opportunities for long-term partnership with First Nations communities and businesses
- Embed accountability and shared responsibility into your systems and structures

Whether you're just getting started or building on existing work, this guide offers tools and prompts to support sustained, sector-specific change.

## Icon definitions

As you work through this document, you'll notice these icons used to highlight key ideas, actions, and reflections along the way.

**Foundations**   **Steps**   **Missteps**   **Tips**

# First Nations ways of knowing, being and doing

## Key concepts and definitions

First Nations ways of knowing, being and doing reflect deeply interconnected systems of knowledge, identity, and responsibility grounded in Country and passed through generations. They reflect how First Nations peoples live with Country, relate to others, and carry forward cultural responsibilities over generations. These are not abstract ideas, they form the very identity of First Nations people and shape how work is approached, how leadership is understood, how decisions are made, and how relationships are maintained. For employers in the decarbonisation sector, understanding these ways of knowing, being and doing is a necessary foundation for ensuring cultural safety within the workforce.

These key concepts, and their relevance to workforce and sector have been summarised below.

Ways of knowing

Ways of being

Ways of doing

**Key concepts, and their relevance to workforce and sector**

| Concept | Definition | Relevance to workforce and sector |
|---|---|---|
| Ways of knowing | How interconnected systems of knowledge are grounded in Country, shaped by observation, story, lived experience, and relationships across generations. | Offers holistic insight into land, water, sky, people and place, supporting complex systems thinking, long-term planning, and sustainability that challenges siloed or extractive approaches. |
| Ways of being | Understanding of self shaped through kinship, spirituality, collective identity, and deep relationality with people and Country. | Informs how people engage in teams, navigate leadership, and hold responsibilities — supporting more relational, inclusive and reciprocal workplace dynamics. |
| Ways of doing | The practice of responsibility through protocol, ceremony, obligation, and action tied to place, role, and relationships. | Guides how work is carried out particularly on Country. Impacts timelines, engagement processes, and how respect, authority and responsibility are enacted across projects. |

## Why it matters

Many decarbonisation roles involve working on or with Country, engaging community, and navigating long-term impacts on land, water and people. First Nations peoples bring systems of knowledge and responsibility that are essential to doing this work well — but are too often ignored or misunderstood. Creating culturally safe workplaces means making space for these ways of knowing, being and doing to shape how projects are planned, how relationships are held, and how people are supported to lead.

# Culturally safe engagement

## Engaging early, meaningfully and with respect

Decarbonisation projects often take place on or near First Nations land, and have direct and lasting impacts on Country and community through land access, environmental change, infrastructure development, and local employment. Meaningful community engagement is essential to the cultural safety and wellbeing of both the local community and First Nations staff, whose cultural integrity depends on workplace practices that honour local protocols and relationships. A failure to engage with community can place staff in situations of harm, isolation, or tension between their cultural and professional identities and may contribute to them exiting the decarbonisation workforce.

## Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC)

Culturally safe project delivery requires a commitment to Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC), as outlined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and reaffirmed in Australia's First Nations Clean Energy Strategy. FPIC means First Nations communities have the time, information, and authority to decide how and if projects proceed in ways that uphold their rights, responsibilities, and connection to Country. Effective engagement must be relationship-led, place-based, and grounded in respect for local cultural authority.

This section outlines how to shift from transactional consultation to genuine, ongoing partnership with First Nations communities.

# A four-phase approach to culturally safe engagement

Employers can use this phased model to guide respectful, place-based project engagement

**1: Prepare**

**2: Initiate contact**

**3: Build the relationship**

**4: Maintain the partnership**

## 1
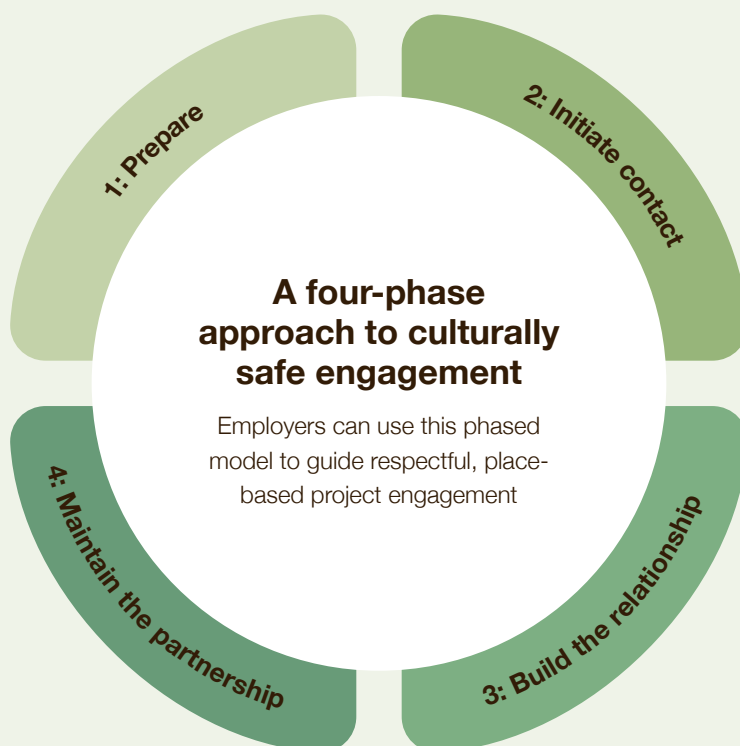
**What to do**
Identify whose Country the project is on. Map key stakeholders (e.g. Traditional Owners, PBCs, Land Councils, ACCOs). Allocate time and budget for cultural protocol adherence.

**Principles to apply**
- Start early, not after design is complete
- Respect cultural leadership and include those with connection to Country, even without formal land rights

## 2

**What to do**
Use the appropriate cultural channels. Request meetings on Country. Begin by listening, not pitching.

**Principles to apply**
- Engagement is relational, not transactional
- Transparency builds trust

## 3

**What to do**
Share clear project info (e.g. visuals, plain English, translated materials). Acknowledge cultural obligations and timing. Compensate people for their time and advice.

**Principles to apply**
- Respect timeframes (e.g. Sorry Business)
- Ensure mutual benefit and shared outcomes

## 4

**What to do**
Provide updates throughout project delivery. Establish ongoing advisory forums. Support benefit-sharing, local jobs or training. Celebrate contributions.

**Principles to apply**
- Engagement is ongoing — not one-and-done
- Accountability must be built in

## Practical tips for employers

- Include community engagement and cultural governance as a standing agenda item in team meetings
- Build timelines that that allow for engagement, ceremony, and cultural protocols
- Budget for engagement costs (e.g. travel, translation, interpreters, Elder fees)
- Provide local protocol guides or cultural induction for all staff working on Country, including First Nations staff from other Nations
- Discuss the cultural significance of the land when engaging with communities

## Common missteps to avoid

**Engage only one representative and assume it's enough**
Why it's harmful: Over-simplifies community dynamics and can damage trust

**Engage only after decisions are made**
Why it's harmful: Reduces participation to tokenistic

**Limit engagement to compliance or Native Title obligations**
Why it's harmful: Misses broader cultural and community knowledge

**Request unpaid advice or input**
Why it's harmful: Exploits cultural knowledge and undermines respectful relationships
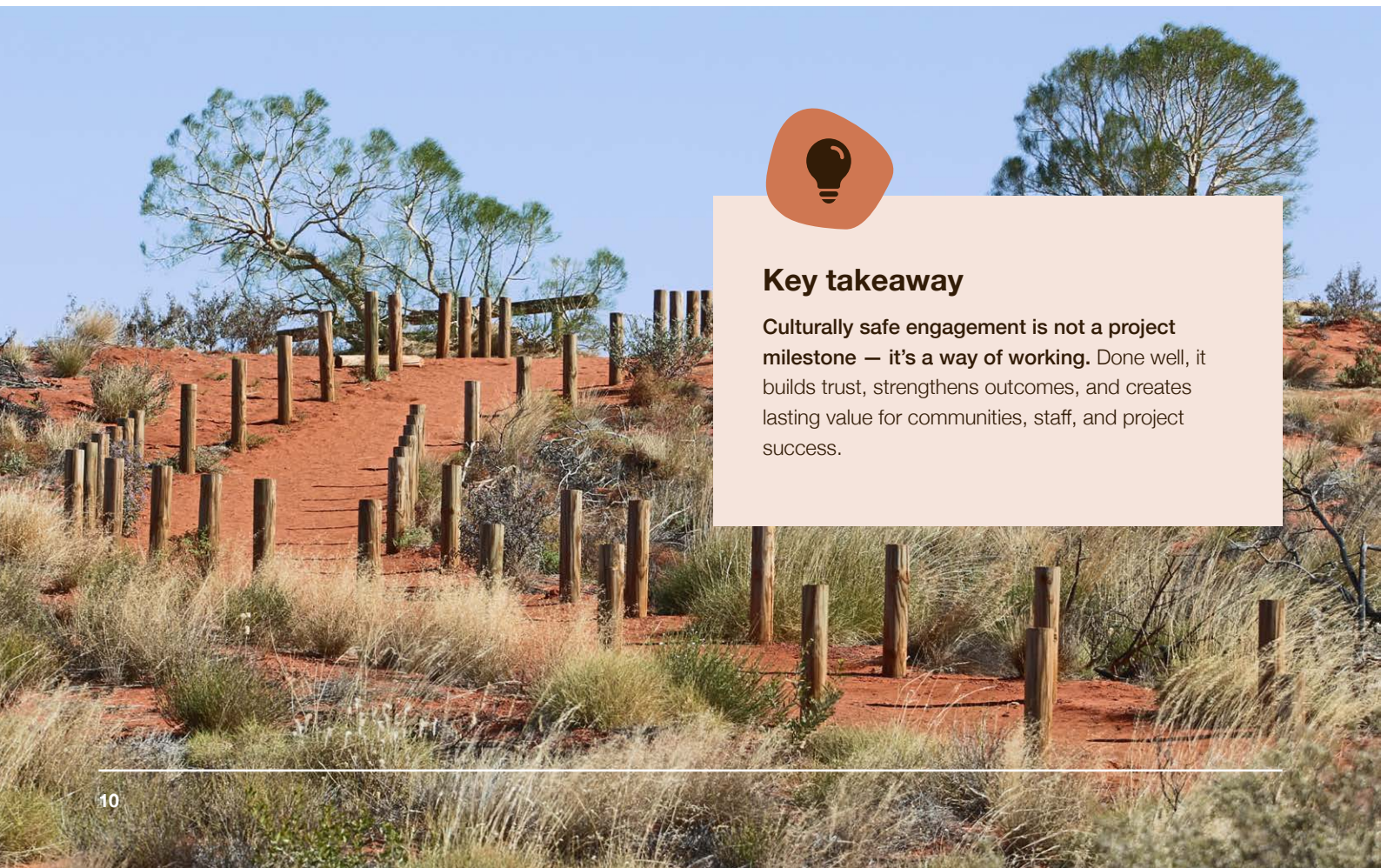
## Key takeaway

**Culturally safe engagement is not a project milestone — it's a way of working.** Done well, it builds trust, strengthens outcomes, and creates lasting value for communities, staff, and project success.

# Procurement and economic participation

## Procurement as a lever for equity and long-term impact

Procurement is one of the most powerful tools employers have to support First Nations participation in the decarbonisation sector. When approached strategically not just transactionally procurement can deliver lasting outcomes for local communities, grow First Nations businesses, and improve project credibility.

Many decarbonisation projects involve extensive supply chains from construction and land management to technical and advisory services. These are opportunities to embed First Nations knowledge, participation, and leadership into the transition to net zero.

## Why it matters

Well-designed procurement strategies:

- Build self-determination, wealth and employment opportunities in First Nations communities
- Strengthen partnerships with Traditional Owners, PBCs, and local ACCOs
- Enhance trust and project legitimacy through community-led delivery
- Embed cultural knowledge into supply chains and project outcomes

## Move beyond minimum compliance

Many employers already engage with Indigenous Procurement Policy (IPP) targets. While important, these policies are just a starting point to create genuine value. Employers should treat procurement as a relationship, not a transaction by going beyond spend tracking to measure broader impact (e.g. jobs created, businesses grown, knowledge shared). Engaging with First Nations businesses early in the project lifecycle, not just at the tendering stage can also be a critical pathway to building more reciprocal partnerships with local Nation groups, building trust and a creating a pipeline of other future First Nations employees.

## Principles

### Accessible and fair
Example: Avoid overly complex tender processes. Break contracts into smaller packages. Use plain English documentation.

### Respected and protected
Example: Engage early to build shared understanding, include Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) clauses in contracts, provide appropriate attribution, and respect data sovereignty.

### Safe and supported
Example: Don't place First Nations contractors into unsafe environments or teams without cultural awareness. Track not only spend but also outcomes (e.g. jobs created, partnerships formed, community benefit).

### Co-design
Example: Co-design scopes of work with local community partners and adapt delivery schedules to align with cultural protocols or timelines.

## Build stronger partnerships not just contracts

Procurement should be approached relationally, not transactionally. First Nations businesses are more than vendors they are often community connectors, cultural authorities, and employers of local talent.

Employers can support longer-term partnership by:

- Offer multi-year or framework agreements
- Support business capacity-building through co-bidding or joint delivery models
- Attend First Nations business expos or capability events
- Asking: *What can we offer this business beyond the contract itself?*

## Embed First Nations participation into procurement systems

Key steps employers can take include:

- Review procurement policies and procedures to include explicit First Nations participation objectives
- Establish or access First Nations supplier register e.g. Supply Nation
- Include First Nations economic outcomes as part of the tender evaluation criteria
- Provide bid coaching or pre-engagement opportunities for First Nations businesses
- Track both spend and outcomes
- Train procurement staff in culturally safe engagement and supplier onboarding
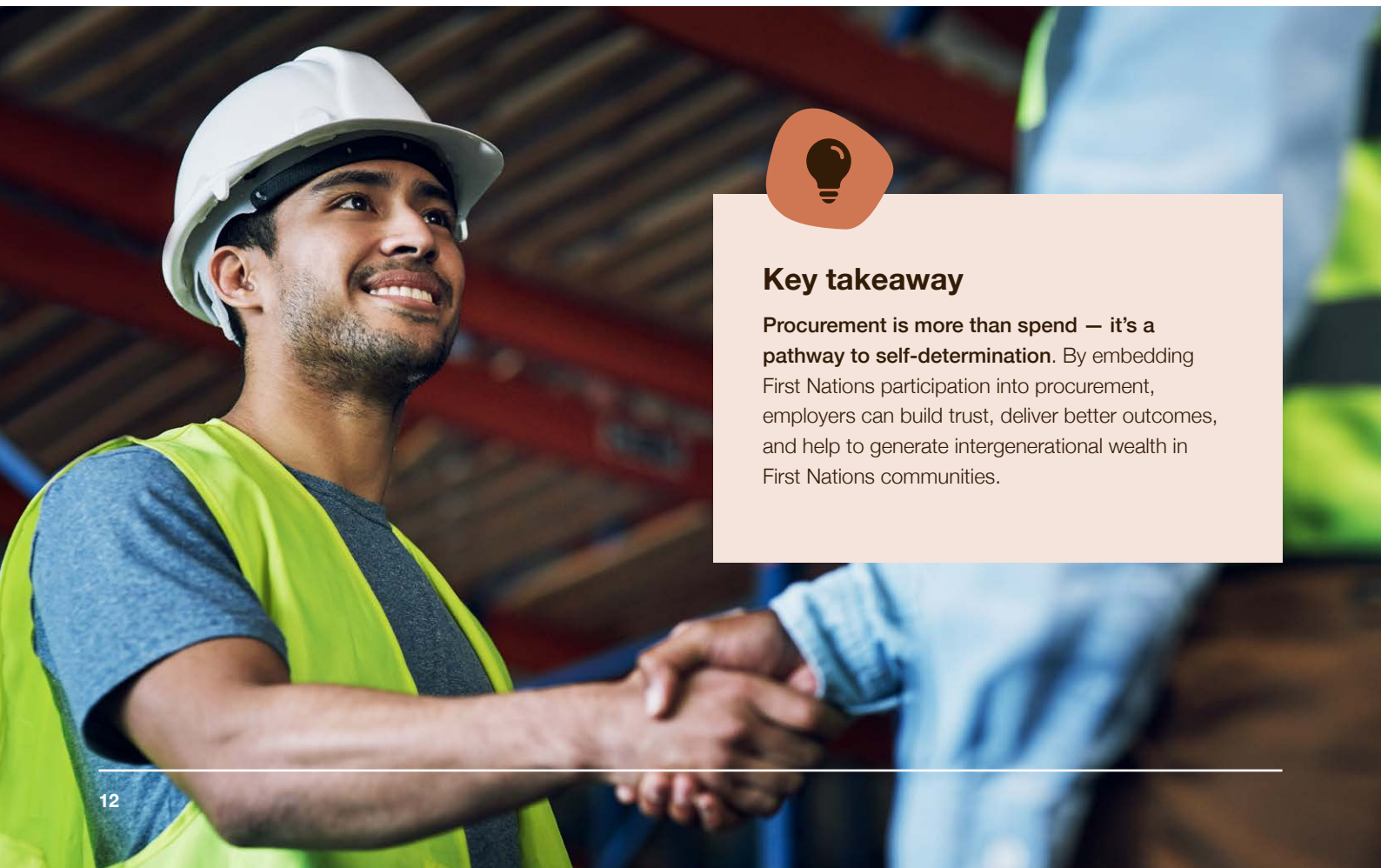
## Key takeaway

**Procurement is more than spend — it's a pathway to self-determination**. By embedding First Nations participation into procurement, employers can build trust, deliver better outcomes, and help to generate intergenerational wealth in First Nations communities.

# Creating a culturally safe workplace

## What is cultural safety – and why it matters

Cultural safety exists when First Nations people feel respected, valued, and able to be themselves without fear of judgement, discrimination, or exclusion. It is not defined by an organisation, but by the experiences of First Nations peoples. It goes beyond awareness and requires structural change, ongoing reflection, and an honest look at how policies, leadership, and behaviours either uphold or undermine inclusion. In the decarbonisation sector, where work often takes place on Country, with long-term impact on land and community, cultural safety is essential to trust, retention, and overall project success.

## Common misconceptions to avoid

*"We treat everyone the same."*
Clarification: Equality is not the same as equity. First Nations staff may have different needs to thrive.

*"We've done cultural awareness training – we're good."*
Clarification: Cultural safety is ongoing. One-off training is not enough.

*"We've never had complaints."*
Clarification: Silence can reflect fear or lack of safety to speak up not absence of issues.

*"We don't have First Nations staff, so it doesn't apply."*
Clarification: All workplaces should be ready to support First Nations staff not just those who already have them.

## Laying the foundation for action

To begin embedding cultural safety in your workplace, consider the following:

**Review values, policies and systems**

- Assess HR policies through a cultural safety lens including onboarding, complaints, flexibility, and performance
- Check whether decision-making processes reflect First Nations perspectives and support cultural obligations
- Include First Nations voices in shaping or reviewing key frameworks

**Recognise the diversity of First Nations peoples and avoid treating communities or staff as if they are all the same**

- Understand that First Nations peoples are not a single group, there are many diverse Nations, languages, and identities
- Learn whose Country you're on, connect with local cultural authorities, and understand their protocols
- Make space for staff to define and express their own cultural identity, don't assume

**Create time and space for cultural connection**

- Build time for yarning, reflection, and respectful conversation into team processes
- Normalise cultural exchange activities (e.g. guest speakers, on-Country learning, cultural knowledge exchange in team meetings, NAIDOC participation)
- Encourage staff to develop shared language and understanding (e.g. correct pronunciation of local Nations)

## Key takeaway

**Cultural safety is a shared responsibility**. It is not the role of First Nations staff to carry or lead this work unless they choose to. Cultural safety must be owned and acted on by the whole organisation.

# Embedding cultural safety into organisational leadership and governance

## Make cultural safety a strategic and structural priority

Cultural safety cannot succeed as a one-off initiative or a responsibility siloed to HR. It must be structurally embedded, visible in leadership, funded in budgets, and reinforced in decision-making processes. This can include:

- Integrate cultural safety into strategic planning, workforce frameworks, and risk registers
- Allocate dedicated resources including budget, staff time, and decision-making authority to drive and sustain progress
- Include cultural safety milestones and measures in project planning, procurement, HR, and executive reporting cycles
- Build in cultural protocols and community engagement as part of project governance, particularly for work on Country

## Share responsibility across leadership

Cultural safety must be shared across the leadership team not siloed or symbolic. This could include:

- Embed cultural safety into the role expectations of all executives and senior leaders, including oversight, reflection, and accountability
- Designate one or more senior leaders with specific authority to lead cultural safety strategy and implementation
- Ensure cultural safety is resourced at the right level not delegated to junior roles, diversity staff, or advisory groups without power
- Model active engagement in cultural learning, reflection, and place-based responsibility (e.g. through on-Country visits, participation in cultural events)
- Ensure leadership behaviour reinforces cultural safety through visible actions, consistent messaging, and responsive decision-making

## Establish robust governance systems that drive accountability

Governance mechanisms should ensure cultural safety is monitored, reviewed, and continuously improved with First Nations staff and community voices at the centre. This could include:

- Create or strengthen First Nations reference groups, cultural safety panels, or co-governance structures for on-Country projects
- Conduct regular reviews of cultural safety alongside broader workplace audits (e.g. RAP evaluations, internal audits, workforce reporting)
- Engage in reflective conversations with First Nations staff and partners to inform internal monitoring, feedback loops, and structural change not just reporting
- Include First Nations people in governance roles, not just consultative positions, providing authority to shape strategy and resource allocation
- Ensure cultural engagement protocols are part of project and board governance including early consultation, shared decision-making, and fair compensation for cultural expertise

# Ideas to strengthen organisational behaviours and cultural safety outcomes

If your organisation is already doing activities below, you are heading in the right direction. However, increasing cultural safety measures at the workplace requires ongoing reflection, learning, and systemic changes, especially in organisational and individual behaviours.

| Things already happening | Question to ask yourself | Suggested actions to strengthen outcomes |
|---|---|---|
| "We have a RAP plan" | "Are we actually embedding it in our day-to-day work?" | · Review and identify where the internal system and process falls short in meeting the RAP goals<br>· Assign and share accountability and responsibility across leadership<br>· Track outcomes |
| "We host NAIDOC events every year" | "What are we doing outside of that week?" | · Consider including culturally safe performance as part of staff review<br>· Including cultural safety as a standalone agenda in all project/team planning and operational processes |
| "Cultural awareness training is a mandatory requirement for our staff" | "How are we making sure the learning from the training shapes individual and organisational behaviours?" | · Facilitate follow-up reflective sessions<br>· Setting expectations for changes practice and track outcomes |
| "We use very inclusive language to make sure everyone feels safe and welcomed" | "Are we walking the talk?" | · Setting achievable and measurable goals for First Nations participation and retention, and share its progress publicly where possible and appropriate |

## Key takeaway

**Cultural safety is a system, not a statement**.
When embedded across leadership, governance, and accountability mechanisms, it becomes part of how your organisation works not just what it says.

# Building cultural capability

## Key principles for building staff capability

Cultural capability refers to the behaviours, knowledge, and attitudes that enable non-Indigenous staff to work respectfully and effectively with First Nations peoples. It involves more than awareness — it requires understanding power, confronting bias, and applying cultural knowledge in daily decisions.

In the decarbonisation sector, where work often takes place on Country and in relationship with communities, cultural capability is essential to safety, trust, and impact. Key principles to guide how you build staff capability include:

*Key principles and what it looks like in practice*

**Organisationally supported**
Cultural capability is resourced, scheduled, and expectations are consistent across roles

**Integrated, not siloed**
Learning informs decisions across recruitment, procurement, project delivery and governance

**Sequenced and developmental**
Learning is ongoing and layered — moving from awareness to reflection, action, and accountability

**First Nations-led learning**
Cultural training and programs are delivered by, or in partnership with, Traditional Owners and local First Nations people and organisations

**Local relevance**
Sessions are grounded in the histories, Nations, and cultural protocols of the area or project site

## Designing an effective cultural capability approach

A strong cultural capability strategy includes multiple learning pathways tailored to different roles and stages of experience, including:

- **Foundation training** – introduction to cultural safety, colonisation, identity, and communication
- **Role-specific content** – tailored for project managers, HR teams, executives, or field staff
- **Place-based induction** – on-Country learning or community-led sessions for staff working on or near First Nations land
- **Ongoing reflection** – peer learning, journalling prompts, or dialogue sessions to deepen understanding
- **Practical tools** – decision-making frameworks, conversation prompts, and checklists to support day-to-day application

## Choosing the right providers

Effective training is First Nations-led and locally grounded. Ask:

- Are the facilitators respected by local First Nations communities, including Traditional Owners?
- Does the program include local cultural context, rather than generic content?
- Are there opportunities for reflection, dialogue and practical application not just information delivery?
- Will the provider support evaluation and follow-up?

## From learning to practice

Cultural capability must translate into visible, felt change. Employers can embed learning by:

- Encourage team leaders to integrate culturally safe practices into team meetings or reflective supervision (e.g. yarning circles, reflective exercises, collaborative decision-making)
- Use prompts at key decision points (e.g. How would this process feel to a First Nations applicant?)
- Set learning goals as part of performance development plans
- Pair learning with action (e.g. cultural training followed by policy review or project redesign)
- Use visual aids or shared language (e.g. local mob/ Nation names, protocols) in internal documents and communications

## Support learning with the right environment

Cultural learning is only effective when paired with a workplace culture that values humility, honesty and collective responsibility. This means:

- Create space for honest questions and reflective conversations
- Recognise that learning is ongoing and relational
- Protect First Nations staff from being expected to lead cultural learning unless they choose to

## Key takeaway

**Capability without accountability is just awareness**. True cultural capability is lived in systems, behaviours and decisions, not just words.

# Inclusive recruitment and outreach

## A relational, strengths-based approach to recruitment

Recruiting First Nations staff is not simply about advertising roles more widely, it requires a shift in how jobs are designed, promoted, assessed and supported. In the decarbonisation sector, where many roles are place-based and community-facing, recruitment must be culturally safe, relational, and responsive to local contexts.

A culturally safe recruitment process builds trust from the start. It values lived experience, supports flexibility, and removes unnecessary barriers. It also recognises that long histories of exclusion, discrimination and underrepresentation shape how First Nations peoples experience recruitment today.

## Common barriers to attracting First Nations peoples

| Inaccessible job design | Strict formal qualifications undervalue lived, cultural or land-based knowledge |

| Narrow recruitment channels | Roles advertised only through mainstream platforms with inaccessible processes and no presence in community spaces |

| Culturally unsafe assessment processes | Interview panels emphasise formality or assertiveness over storytelling or values |

| Lack of trust or connection | Little to no community engagement before recruitment begins |

| One-size-fits-all expectations | Cultural obligations, collective identity and location needs are overlooked |

# Strategies for inclusive recruitment

**1**

### Design roles that are flexible and strengths-based

- Remove unnecessary qualification requirements where cultural knowledge or experience is relevant
- Create space for cultural leave, part-time roles or seasonal/project-based roles
- Recognise non-traditional skillsets such as community leadership, land-care experience or cultural knowledge
- Where appropriate, use identified positions for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander applicants, following relevant legal guidelines

**2**

### Build relationships before recruiting

- Connect with local communities, schools, TAFEs or VET providers in advance of hiring rounds
- Where possible, co-design roles or entry pathways with community partners or ACCOs
- Host info sessions in community settings to explain roles, support the application process and build trust

**3**

### Advertise through community networks

- Use plain language and include a short, values-based description of your organisation's commitment to cultural safety
- Promote roles through First Nations platforms (e.g. Koori Mail, Indigenous employment services, ACCO newsletters, Facebook groups) and share job ads with local community organisations and partners — not just job boards

**4**

### Make assessment processes culturally safe

- Allow phone or video applications if written forms are a barrier
- Offer support people in interviews or onboarding conversations
- Share questions in advance, and allow storytelling or practical examples as valid responses
- Include at least one First Nations person in selection or assessment, where possible
- Respect diverse communication styles — don't equate silence or indirectness with disengagement
- Ensure background checks (e.g. criminal history) are applied with awareness of systemic issues such as over-policing, racial profiling, and disproportionate incarceration of First Nations peoples — in line with Closing the Gap commitments

## Investing in long-term career pathways

Recruitment should also be the start of a longer journey, not just a response to immediate vacancies. Employers can strengthen their long-term workforce and leadership pipelines if they:

- Partner with RTOs, TAFEs or ACCOs to establish traineeships, cadetships, and pre-employment programs
- Offer paid work experience or job shadowing to young people or career changers
- Support school-based apprenticeships or graduate programs with wrap-around cultural supports
- Connect with local youth programs, Indigenous STEM initiatives, or land-based education programs to grow interest early
- Provide transition support for First Nations staff transitioning from other sectors (e.g. land care, community services, mining)
- Offer flexible work arrangements to support family, cultural, or community responsibilities
- Actively create visible career progression pathways, including internal messaging, mentoring programs and identified leadership roles

When employers invest in early career support and long-term progression, recruitment becomes a pathway to leadership — not just a point of entry.

## Key takeaway

**Capability without accountability is just awareness**. True cultural capability is lived in systems, behaviours and decisions, not just words.

# Culturally safe onboarding

## Key principles for culturally safe onboarding

Onboarding is the moment where trust is either built or broken. For First Nations staff, it sets the tone for whether their cultural identity will be respected, supported, and valued or whether they will feel pressure to "fit in" to unsafe norms. A culturally safe onboarding process affirms identity, establishes support structures, and prepares staff to succeed long-term.

*Key principles and what it looks like in practice*

**Peer and community support**
New staff are not left to navigate systems alone. Support structures are in place and visible.

**Two-way learning**
Supervisors and team members are prepared to listen and learn from the employee's knowledge and lived experience.

**Clarity and welcome**
Roles, expectations and supports are clearly explained in plain language. The employee feels genuinely valued.

**Cultural safety from day one**
Policies, team behaviours and visual signals affirm identity and allow people to bring their full selves.

# Steps to effective onboarding

**1**

**Before day one**

- Assign a cultural mentor or buddy, ideally with cultural awareness and knowledge of the role or workplace
- Ensure all key staff (managers, supervisors, site leads) have completed cultural capability training
- Prepare an onboarding plan that includes time for cultural orientation, not just compliance briefings
- Confirm that policies on cultural leave, flexible work, and cultural safety are up-to-date and communicated internally

**3**

**Support early relationship-building**

- Create time in the first weeks to meet senior staff, community partners, and other First Nations colleagues
- Schedule regular check-ins not just for task management, but to ask how they're settling in and what they need
- Avoid placing pressure on the employee to represent all First Nations people or lead cultural activities unless they choose to

**2**

**Create a strong first impression**

- Begin the induction with an Acknowledgment of Country or, where appropriate, a Welcome by a Traditional Owner
- Clearly outline:
  - Role expectations and team structure
  - Support structures available (e.g. EAP, peer support, HR contact, cultural leave)
  - How to access cultural leave, mentoring or training
  - Include visual signs of respect e.g. First Nations-designed welcome packs

**4**

**Set mutual expectations**

- Use a two-way conversation to explore:
  - What support the staff member needs
  - What culturally safe practices look like for them
  - What they expect from the team or manager in building cultural safety
- Reinforce that their knowledge, cultural background and experiences are valued, not something to be minimised

## Key takeaway

**Avoid overloading with forms or one-way briefings**. Stretch onboarding across multiple sessions and balance relational time with procedural requirements.

# Supporting First Nations staff

## Embedding cultural safety from the outset

Cultural safety is built (or broken) through daily experiences not just policies or training. For First Nations staff, safety is often felt in subtle but powerful signals: who is in the room, how culture is acknowledged, whether protocols are respected, and whether inclusion is lived or just stated.

A culturally safe workplace enables First Nations staff to show up fully, contribute meaningfully, and lead when they choose to. This section outlines how employers can bring cultural safety to life through environment, systems, and behaviour.

## Create culturally safe environments

The physical and symbolic design of a workplace sends a clear message about who belongs. Practical actions can include:

- Display the **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flag**, local Nation names and Acknowledgment of Country signage, email signatures, or documents (with permission)
- Commission and attribute **artworks by local First Nations artists** in shared spaces
- Provide **culturally safe breakout spaces** — quiet, private, sensory-aware

These small gestures, when done respectfully, help normalise visibility and signal cultural inclusion.

## Apply a cultural lens to policies and processes

Every policy, from leave to performance management, has the potential to enable or exclude. Review and adapt your systems to include:

- **Cultural leave** for *Sorry Business*, ceremony, and family obligations with a clear, low-barrier request process
- **Flexible work options** to accommodate community roles and cultural events at short notice
- **Support persons** (e.g. Elders, cultural mentors) in disciplinary or performance-related processes and **mechanisms to address racism and cultural safety** through trauma-aware reporting pathways
- **Performance review processes** with culturally relevant indicators of success e.g. community leadership, cultural contributions, mentoring others, rather than just individual KPIs
- **Dress policies** that allow cultural expression (e.g. a woven badge, beaded earrings, or clothing with Aboriginal art)
- **Language use** that is strengths based and avoids deficit framings (e.g. "disadvantaged" or "at risk") unless legally required

These changes help move cultural safety from values statements into the operational heart of the organisation.

## Shift everyday workplace behaviours

Cultural safety is reinforced (or undermined) in the daily culture of teams. Leaders and colleagues should:

- Begin meetings with a rotating **Acknowledgment of Country**, not always delivered by First Nations staff
- Use **yarning and reflective conversation** in planning, review, and supervision processes
- **Respect relational leadership styles**, valuing deep listening, collective insight, and community obligations
- Learn **correct pronunciation of local mob/Nation names and cultural terms**
- Avoid cultural generalisations, assumptions, or over-reliance on one staff member for cultural input
- Ensure social events are inclusive (e.g. avoid defaulting to alcohol-based activities

Small changes to relational and cultural dynamics can have a big impact, especially when sustained and normalised across teams.

## Key takeaway

**Cultural safety is everyone's responsibility**.
It must be visible and actively upheld by all staff, not carried by First Nations employees alone.

# Retaining and growing First Nations staff

## Nurture First Nations leaders

Retention is not just about keeping staff it's about creating the conditions where First Nations people can thrive, lead, and grow. High turnover is often less about performance, and more about cultural isolation, lack of progression, or unaddressed harm. A strong retention strategy invests in development, recognises cultural load, and builds trust through action, not promises.



## Address the reasons people leave

| | |
|---|---|
| **Cultural isolation** | Only First Nations person in their team, no peer support or visible cultural inclusion |
| **Lack of cultural safety** | Comments, decisions or practices undermine cultural identity or protocols |
| **Unrecognised cultural load** | Staff expected to lead cultural work or educate others without recognition or support |
| **Lack of progression pathways** | Staff feel 'stuck' in entry-level roles, with no clear progression opportunities |
| **Inflexibility systems** | Cultural and family obligations not accommodated or understood |

## Strengthen progression pathways

- Offer individual development plans aligned to goals and strengths
- Create opportunities for training, secondments, and project leadership
- Support First Nations staff to step into supervisory, specialist or leadership roles
- Avoid "pigeonholing" into liaison or cultural roles unless this aligns with their career aspirations

## Build a culturally safe approach to performance and support

- Train supervisors in trauma-aware, culturally safe performance management
- Use supervision to check in on wellbeing and cultural identity, not just task delivery
- Incorporate culturally relevant contributions (e.g. mentoring, cultural guidance) into performance management
- Allow support people (e.g. mentors, Elders, cultural advocates) in formal conversations
- Provide anonymous or culturally safe feedback pathways for staff to raise concerns
- Adapt leave options to reflect cultural responsibility and connection
- Provide access to culturally safe wellbeing services (e.g. Indigenous counsellors, EAPs)

## Strategies to reduce harm

Strategies to reduce harm include:

- Asking don't assume whether a staff member wants to take on cultural roles
- Recognise cultural contributions in workload allocation, remuneration, or time-in-lieu
- Share cultural safety responsibilities across multiple staff or engage external cultural advisors
- Include colonial load in supervision, wellbeing check-ins, and performance planning

## Recognise and manage cultural load

Colonial load refers to the additional, often invisible pressures First Nations staff experience, such as:

- Being expected to speak for all First Nations peoples
- Educating others about culture or racism
- Leading NAIDOC events, Reconciliation Action Plan working groups, or induction sessions
- Navigating trauma, grief or community obligations while maintaining professional expectations

## Key takeaway

**Retention is a reflection of cultural safety**. When First Nations staff are respected, supported, and given space to grow, they stay — and they lead.

# Sustaining change

## Turning commitment into sustained change

Cultural safety doesn't succeed on good intentions, it relies on systems of accountability. These systems ensure that progress is tracked, feedback is heard, and action is taken. For employers, accountability is how cultural safety becomes a consistent organisational practice not just a stated value. In the decarbonisation sector, accountability also means being answerable to the First Nations communities you work with, not just internal metrics or public messaging.

## Key domains of accountability

### Leadership and governance
What it requires: Cultural safety is monitored and owned at the executive and board level not siloed to HR, support networks or RAP teams.

### Measurement and evaluation
What it requires: Cultural safety goals are tracked using a mix of qualitative and quantitative indicators.

### Feedback and voice
What it requires: First Nations staff and partners have opportunities to provide input safely and see it acted on.

### Transparency
What it requires: Progress is communicated internally and externally, including successes and areas for improvement.

### Responsiveness
What it requires: Data and feedback lead to real changes in policies, structures, and practices.

## What to measure and how

A meaningful accountability approach balances numbers with narrative. While quantitative metrics are essential, they must be paired with qualitative insights that contextualise this data to reflect lived experience.

### First Nations workforce participation
Example: % of employees by location, role type, level, and business area.

### Retention and progression
Example: Turnover rates, % of staff promoted, average tenure, exit survey themes.

### Learning and development
Example: % of staff completing cultural training, integration of cultural capability into Professional development processes.

### Procurement and partnerships
Example: Spend with First Nations businesses, types of relationships, employment outcomes supported.

### Staff experience and voice
Example: Cultural safety survey data, anonymous feedback channels, yarning or storytelling sessions.

### Action on feedback
Example: Track how feedback has informed changes to policies, tools or decisions.

*Tip: Include both internal indicators (e.g. workforce data) and external-facing indicators (e.g. trust and reputation among local communities or partners).*

## Structures that support accountability

To embed accountability systemically, organisations can:

- Establish a Cultural Safety Governance Group or subcommittee of the executive team
- Assign accountability for cultural safety KPIs to specific leaders or departments
- Conduct regular cultural audits or reviews of key processes (e.g. hiring, onboarding, complaints management)
- Include cultural safety in annual performance reviews for managers and supervisors
- Invite external First Nations advisors to participate in reviews, policy updates or evaluation processes
- Develop a dashboard or reporting tool to track cultural indicators across the organisation

## Creating safe feedback mechanisms

To ensure First Nations staff and partners can raise concerns or make suggestions safely:

- Provide anonymous or low-barrier mechanisms (e.g. surveys, pulse check-ins, suggestion boxes)
- Create safe, facilitated feedback forums where mob can speak freely with appropriate support
- Allow staff to give feedback in ways that reflect cultural communication norms not only written forms
- Communicate how feedback will be used, and follow up with updates on changes made
- Ensure cultural safety issues are not minimised or deprioritised when raised especially if discomfort arises

Feedback systems must be designed to protect trust, not erode it. They should allow for challenge, learning and change, especially when mistakes happen.

## Transparency and shared responsibility

Transparency builds trust. This means:

- Reporting cultural safety progress and challenges in internal updates, processes such as RAP reports, engagement principles or sustainability statements
- Including First Nations employment, retention and procurement goals in organisational KPIs and public commitments
- Being honest when things fall short and outlining clear next steps for improvement
- Sharing lessons learned with other organisations to support sector-wide change

Responsibility must also be distributed, not delegated. Cultural safety is not the job of a single First Nations employee, nor a network or RAP committee. It is a shared outcome across teams, leaders and business units.

## Key takeaway

**Accountability is how we move from values to outcomes**. Organisations that embed accountability into leadership, systems and culture are more likely to retain First Nations staff, build trusted partnerships, and deliver stronger, community-grounded results.

# Conclusion and next steps

## A shared opportunity, a shared responsibility

As Australia moves toward net zero, the decarbonisation workforce must reflect the knowledge, aspirations, and leadership of First Nations peoples. This guide has set out practical, evidence-informed strategies to support employers to:

- Embed cultural safety into workplaces and projects
- Remove systemic barriers to First Nations participation
- Strengthen long-term pathways for employment, leadership, and procurement
- Engage with First Nations people, communities and businesses in ways that are relational, not transactional
- Shift responsibility from individuals to systems and structures

By committing to these actions, employers can contribute to a clean energy transition that is not only inclusive but grounded in self-determination and cultural integrity.
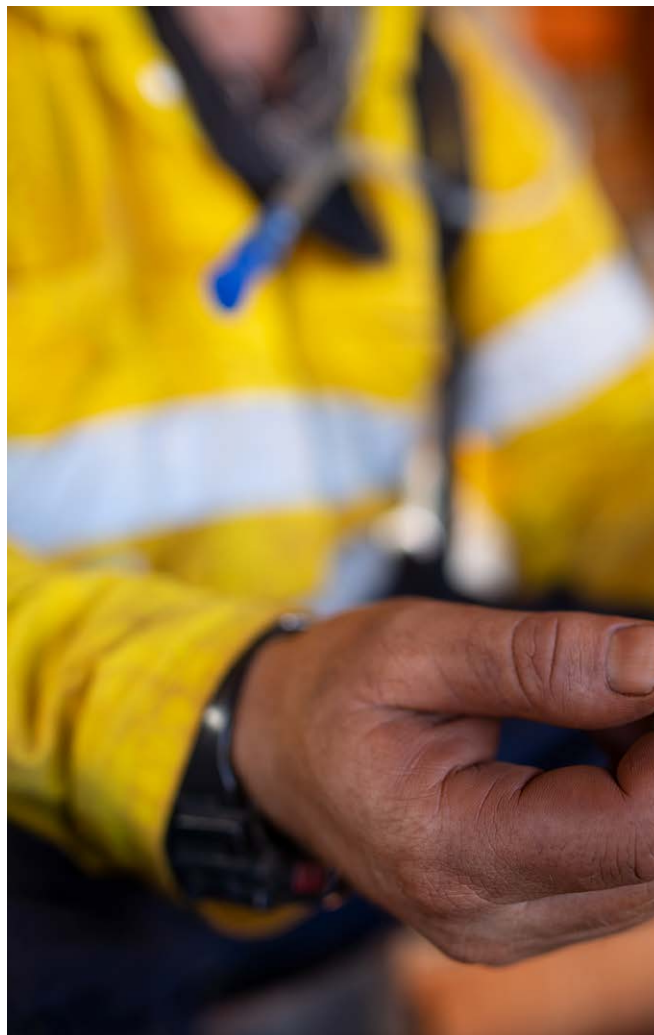
# Start where you are and take the next step

Organisations will begin this journey from different points. Whether you're just getting started or building on years of experience, cultural safety requires ongoing action, reflection, and system-level change. Use the table below to identify what meaningful action looks like at your current stage of maturity:

| Action area | Getting started | Building momentum | Leading practice |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Leadership and governance** | Nominate a senior leader to oversee First Nations workforce and cultural safety commitments | Embed cultural safety into executive KPIs and decision-making structures | Establish cultural governance mechanisms (e.g. advisory group, co-governance structure) with authority and resourcing |
| **Policy and systems** | Review key HR policies (e.g. leave, onboarding, grievance) for cultural relevance | Co-design or update policies with First Nations staff, advisors, or community partners | Conduct system-wide audits to embed cultural safety into all internal policies, structures, and service workflows |
| **Workplace culture** | Introduce reflection prompts or Acknowledgment of Country in team settings | Create a First Nations staff network and ensure colonial load is recognised and resourced | Integrate cultural safety into performance frameworks, team planning, and leadership behaviours organisation-wide |
| **Recruitment and onboarding** | Adapt job ads and position descriptions for inclusive, strengths-based language and flexibility | Partner with First Nations orgs on recruitment outreach or co-design identified roles | Establish supported employment pathways (e.g. traineeships, apprenticeships, graduate programs) co-developed with the local community |
| **Procurement** | Map and engage local First Nations suppliers and service providers | Set internal First Nations procurement targets, and embed them into project delivery | Co-design long-term procurement strategies and contracts that enable local ownership, enterprise growth, and benefit-sharing |
| **Community engagement** | Initiate early contact with Traditional Owners, PBCs, Land Councils or other community leaders | Include cultural engagement milestones and budget in delivery schedules | Establish formalised partnerships with Traditional Owners or ACCOs to guide ongoing project delivery and shared outcomes |
| **Monitoring and review** | Set measurable goals and track progress (e.g. First Nations participation or training completion) | Introduce culturally safe feedback channels and regular reporting mechanisms | Embed cultural safety accountability in executive reviews, governance reporting, and external sustainability frameworks |

*Tip: Choose 1–2 action areas to focus on in the next 3–6 months, aligned to your current priorities.*
*Schedule a review and adjust as you grow.*

## Resources and support

To implement the actions in this guide, employers can draw on:

- **First Nations organisations and advisors** for guidance, review and community connection
- **Existing frameworks**, including Reconciliation Action Plans, Indigenous Procurement Policies, and cultural capability resources
- **Sector-specific partnership**s, such as the First Nations Clean Energy Network, environmental ranger programs, or industry-led employment hubs
- **Peer learning**, including cross-organisation networks, communities of practice and shared case studies

Where possible, prioritise First Nations-led providers and local relationships that support self-determination and place-based development.

## Key takeaway

**Accountability is how we move from values to outcomes**. Organisations that embed accountability into leadership, systems and culture are more likely to retain First Nations staff, build trusted partnerships, and deliver stronger, community-grounded results.

# Appendix 1:
# Tools and prompts

## Community engagement readiness checklist

For project or partnership planning

| Question | Yes | No | Notes / Actions |
|---|---|---|---|
| Have we identified the Traditional Owners of the land this project is on? | | | |
| Have we contacted relevant Traditional Owners, PBCs, Land Councils or local Elders? | | | |
| Have we allocated budget and time for respectful First Nations engagement and recognition? | | | |
| Are we aware of cultural protocols and obligations in this area? | | | |
| Are First Nations partners involved in shaping the project not just reacting to it? | | | |
| Are we offering appropriate recognition or compensation for contributions? | | | |
| Do we have a plan for maintaining relationships during and post-project? | | | |

## First Nations procurement planning checklist

Tip: This can be used during project planning or annual procurement reviews to benchmark progress

| Question | Yes | No | Notes / Actions |
|---|---|---|---|
| Procurement policy reviewed for First Nations leadership and participation targets | | | |
| Do we have an up-to-date register of First Nations businesses in relevant sectors? | | | |
| Are project managers and procurement leads trained in culturally safe supplier engagement? | | | |
| Do our procurement processes and tenders include rated evaluation criteria enabling First Nations employment or business outcomes? | | | |
| Have we engaged with local Traditional Owners or ACCOs to identify partnership opportunities? | | | |
| Are we tracking both spend and outcomes (e.g. jobs, training, partnerships)? | | | |

# Reflective exercise for executives and leadership teams

**Purpose:** To support executive leaders and senior managers to reflect on how cultural safety is currently understood, experienced, and acted upon in their organisation – and to identify key areas for action.

**Suggested format:** 60-minute facilitated discussion or self-guided workshop (can be adapted to team or individual use).

### Part A: Self-assessment questions (25 mins)

Reflect on the following prompts individually or in small groups. Use them to explore your current understanding and assumptions:

How do I define cultural safety – and who do I think is responsible for it?

What assumptions do I hold (consciously or unconsciously) about First Nations peoples, including in the workplace?

When was the last time I sought feedback from a First Nations colleague, partner or organisation – and how did I respond to it?

Have I ever witnessed culturally unsafe behaviour or language in my team? How did I respond?

Would a First Nations person feel safe in our current leadership spaces? What might make them hesitate to speak openly or take on a senior role?

What opportunities are in place to support the growth and progression of First Nations staff? Are they supported to take on leadership roles, influence strategy, and build their careers across all areas of the organisation — not only First Nations-specific roles? What barriers still exist, and how are we actively addressing them?

## Part B: Team discussion to audit existing practices (25 mins)

Using the prompts in the table below, facilitate a structured conversation across your leadership or executive team.

## Part C: Closing reflection (10 mins)

This exercise can be used as part of onboarding for senior leaders, during leadership retreats, or integrated into regular performance and culture reviews. Ask each participant to write down:

One thing they learned or reconsidered

_____

One immediate action they can take in their role to improve cultural safety

_____

One structural change the organisation should prioritise

_____

| Area | Discussion prompt |
|------|-------------------|
| Policies | Which of our current policies explicitly support cultural safety? Where are the gaps or unspoken assumptions? |
| Practice | How is cultural safety demonstrated in our day-to-day decisions (e.g. hiring, procurement, project governance)? |
| Leadership behaviour | What signals are we sending – intentionally or not – about whose culture and ways of working are prioritised? |
| Engagement | How are we involving First Nations peoples and organisations in shaping our workplace? Is it genuine and ongoing? |
| Accountability | What systems are in place to identify, respond to, and learn from culturally unsafe incidents? |

## Reflective exercises and micro-practices for team meetings

These exercises are designed to be lightweight, repeatable, and team-led, they can be used in team meetings, debriefs, onboarding, or after training. Each encourages one or more of the following: reflection, relationality, respect, reciprocity, or responsibility and aim to benefit all staff to show up as their whole selves, not just First Nations staff.

*"Think of a time you felt out of place at work – what helped you feel included? What made it harder?"*
Invite voluntary sharing in a circle. Ask each person to speak (or pass). After sharing, reflect: What assumptions or behaviours might unknowingly create exclusion? How might we change that?

*"Take a moment to name the Country you're on today and how you're showing up."*
Invite staff to begin meetings by acknowledging the local Nation they are on, and reflect briefly on their energy or intention, normalising connection to place self-awareness and relationality.

*"What's one thing you're currently unlearning or questioning about your assumptions, practices, or position?"*
Invite staff to share one thing they read, listened to, or reflected on recently that shifted their thinking. Centres humility, positions learning as continuous, and opens up conversations beyond formal sessions.

# Cultural capability provider guide

This tool supports employers to make informed, respectful decisions when selecting cultural training and learning partners.

| Criteria | Green flag | Red flag |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Cultural authority | Provider is First Nations-led, community endorsed, and/or connected to local Traditional Owners. | Non-Indigenous-led, unclear connection to Country or community |
| Local relevance | Content includes specific cultural protocols, history, and mobs/Nations relevant to the area or project site. | Generic content with no local or regional specificity. |
| Relational approach | Facilitators prioritise storytelling, dialogue, and reciprocal learning not just content delivery. | Lecture-style, information-heavy sessions with little room for reflection or relationship-building. |
| Depth over compliance | Supports reflection, self-awareness, and real-world application. | Emphasises 'dos and don'ts' without exploring context or underlying assumptions. |
| Follow-up and support | Offers evaluation, tailored follow-up sessions, or resources to embed learning. | One-off session with no feedback loop, follow-up, or integration support. |
| Credibility and transparency | Transparent about team experience, methodology, and outcomes. | Vague about who facilitates the training or how content is developed. |
| Respectful engagement with staff | Enables First Nations staff to determine their own input and contribution, ensuring staff are not put in an uncomfortable position such as defending their culture during training. | Places cultural load on First Nations staff without consent or recognition. |
| Adaptability to workforce roles/sectors | Tailors content to specific industries or roles (e.g. Executive and senior leaders, HR, field teams) | Uses the same materials across sectors regardless of context. |

*Tip: Where possible, seek referrals or endorsements from Traditional Owners, local ACCOs or other First Nations organisations. You can also ask if the provider is listed or recommended by organisations such as Supply Nation, Reconciliation Australia or sector-specific First Nations networks).*

# Inclusive recruitment checklist

For reviewing hiring processes

| Action | Yes | No | Notes / Actions |
|---|---|---|---|
| Role description reviewed for accessible, inclusive language | | | |
| Formal qualifications required only where essential | | | |
| Cultural safety supports and flexibility outlined in job ad, with a simple application process where possible and processes that consider the historical and ongoing contexts impacting First Nations peoples. | | | |
| Ad shared through First Nations networks | | | |
| Traditional Owners and community organisations contacted for outreach | | | |
| Interview format allows support person / flexible styles | | | |
| First Nations person included in review process | | | |

## Culturally safe onboarding checklist

To guide a strong first month

| Action | Yes | No | Notes / Actions |
|---|---|---|---|
| Cultural mentor / buddy identified and briefed | | | |
| Welcome includes Welcome to Country or Acknowledgment | | | |
| Cultural safety and support options shared early | | | |
| Time for team and relationship-building planned | | | |
| Induction split across multiple sessions (not all on day one) | | | |
| Cultural leave, dress, and flexibility policies discussed clearly | | | |
| Supervisor check-ins scheduled (1 week, 1 month, 3 months) | | | |
| Support person welcome in early meetings if requested | | | |

# Cultural safety policy audit tool

Review internal policies and systems

| Policy area | Yes | No | Notes / Actions |
|---|---|---|---|
| Cultural leave policy inclusive of Sorry Business, ceremony, community, family commitments etc | | | |
| Trauma-informed grievance process | | | |
| Support persons permitted in formal HR processes | | | |
| Flexibility for cultural/community obligations | | | |
| Performance processes recognise cultural contributions as appropriate | | | |
| Dress codes accommodate cultural expression where possible | | | |
| Onboarding includes cultural protocols and safety info | | | |
| Welcome to Country and Acknowledgment of Country guidance or protocol is available internally | | | |
| Policies use inclusive, non-deficit language and give consideration to the historical and ongoing contexts impacting First Nations peoples. | | | |

# Reflection prompts

## A: Team-based reflection prompts

For use in meetings, group check-ins or facilitated yarning circles.

What's one thing I've learned recently that challenged how I work?

How are we making space for cultural knowledge or relationships in our work?

Have we considered how this project or decision might be experienced by mob?

Is there anything we're doing or not doing that could be causing cultural harm?

Are our ways of working creating safety or invisibility?

Name the Country you're on and how you're showing up today

## B: Individual or supervision prompts

For 1:1s, performance conversations, self-reflection, or supervisor check-ins.

What helped you feel like you belonged in a new workplace?

Are there parts of your identity or culture you feel you need to leave at the door here?

Is there anything in our systems or team practices that makes you feel unsupported or unseen?

What would help you feel more confident, safe or valued in your role right now?

## Accountability pulse check

Use quarterly in leadership and governance forums

| Prompt | Notes / Actions |
| --- | --- |
| What have we heard from First Nations staff – and what are we doing about it? | |
| What cultural safety concerns have been raised in the last 3–6 months? | |
| How have we responded – and how has that been communicated? | |
| Are our leaders and systems reinforcing cultural safety – or leaving it to individuals? | |
| What progress are we making – and what's still missing? | |