

Employer Guide: Creating inclusive workplaces

A practical guide for employers to
support First Nations participation



Acknowledgement

We acknowledge Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Custodians of our land and its waters. Ninti One Limited and our project partners wish to pay respects to Elders, past and present, and to the youth, for the future. We extend this to all Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people reading this document.

Use of sensitive terms

The terms 'Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander', 'Aboriginal', 'Indigenous' and 'First Nations' may be used interchangeably throughout our resources. Using these terminologies, we seek to acknowledge and honour diversity, shared knowledge and experiences as well as the right of stakeholders to define their own identities.

Appreciation

Ninti One gratefully acknowledges the contribution of our project partners Alinga Energy Consulting, Community Works, Humanitarian and Development Consulting Pty Ltd, Building Indigenous Capability Pty Ltd and consultants Dr Dan Tyson and Alanna Reneman to the First Nations Engagement in the Transition to Net Zero project and the development of this resource.

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Disclaimer

This resource has been compiled using a range of materials. While care has been taken in its preparation, Ninti One and its partners accept no responsibility for the accuracy or completeness of any material contained in this document. All parties involved disclaim all liability to any person in respect of anything, and of the consequences of anything done or omitted to be done by any such person in reliance (whether wholly or partially) upon any information presented in this document.





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.

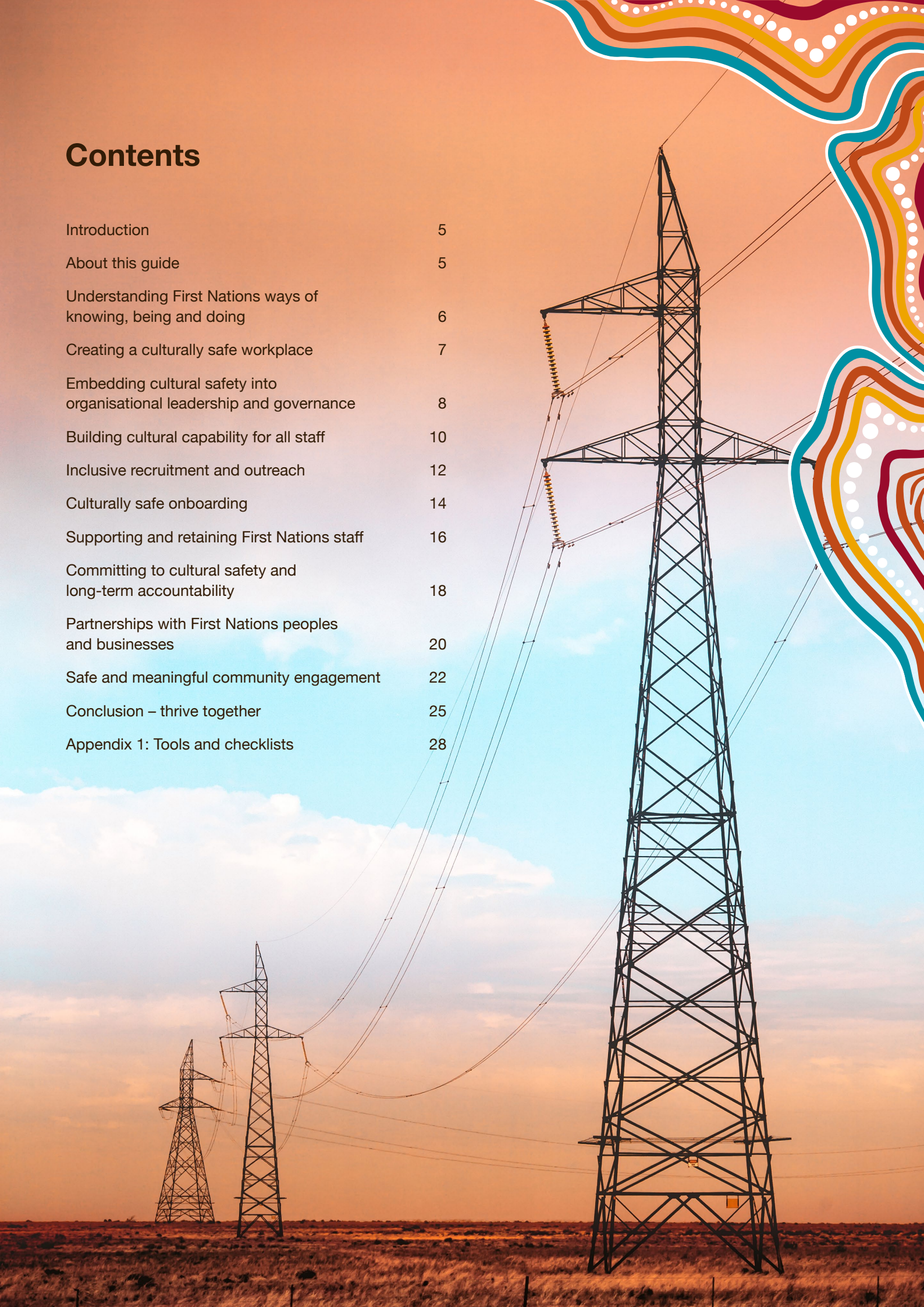
Each pathway and section of the design has plenty of community symbols. This represents the support of those who are encouraging and helping to build confidence for these First Nations peoples.

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.

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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.

As Australia transitions to a net zero economy, there is growing recognition of the vital role First Nations peoples play in shaping and contributing to the future workforce. Through earlier work focused on the **decarbonisation sector**, Ninti One developed a suite of resources to support employers, including a guide for managing decarbonisation projects and workplaces. You can explore these resources on the [Ninti One website](#).

During this work, it became clear that many of the opportunities and challenges identified are **common across all industries**, not just those linked to clean energy and decarbonisation. Employers in a wide range of sectors were seeking practical, actionable guidance on how to create culturally safe, inclusive, and supportive workplaces for First Nations peoples. This led to the development of this guide, which is designed to be **relevant and useful across all sectors**.

About this guide

This guide is a practical resource for employers across all sectors 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 insight 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 are just getting started or building on existing work, this guide offers tools and prompts to support sustained, workplace-wide change.



Understanding First Nations ways of knowing, being and doing

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 peoples.

They shape:

- The approaches to work
- Leadership and decision-making process, and
- How relationships are built and maintained.

For employers across all sectors, understanding these ways of knowing, being and doing is a necessary foundation for ensuring cultural safety within the workforce.

Why it matters

First Nations peoples bring systems of knowledge and responsibility that are essential to creating a safe place for everyone, but are too often ignored or misunderstood. Making space for these ways of knowing, being and doing helps shape how work is approached, how relationships are held, and how people are supported to lead.

Concept	Definition	Relevance to workforce and sector
Ways of knowing	How interconnected systems of knowledge are grounded in Country. They are shaped by observation, story, lived experience, and relationships across generations.	Offers holistic insight into people and place. Supports complex systems thinking, long-term planning, and sustainability.
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. Supports 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.

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 defined by the experiences of First Nations peoples. It goes beyond awareness and requires structural change and ongoing reflection. In any sector or workplace, cultural safety is essential to trust, retention, and effectiveness. When cultural identity is unsupported or ignored, it creates harm, undermines relationships, and contributes to poor outcomes for staff and the communities they serve.

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

- 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)

Common misconceptions to avoid

"We treat everyone the same."

Clarification: Equality is not the same as equity. First Nations staff may require different supports 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.

Key takeaway

Cultural safety is a shared responsibility.

First Nations staff are not obligated to carry out 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-time initiative or as a responsibility isolated to HR. It must be structurally embedded, evident in leadership, funded within 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 business plans, procurement, HR, and executive reporting cycles
- Build in cultural protocols and community engagement as part of organisational 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
- Model active engagement in cultural learning, reflection, and place-based responsibility (e.g. through on-Country visits, participation in cultural events)



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 • Assign and share accountability and responsibility across leadership • 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 • 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 • 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.

To see what your workplace is already doing and how it can do better see *1: Reflective exercise for executives and leadership teams* in Appendix 1.

Building cultural capability for all staff

Key principles for building staff capability

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

Designing an effective cultural capability approach

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

- **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

Key principles and what it looks like in practice

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

Sequenced and developmental

Learning is ongoing and layered – moving from awareness to reflection, action, and accountability

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

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

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

Do you want to do more and better?

See [2. Reflective exercises and micro-practices for team meetings](#) and [3. Reflection prompts](#) in Appendix 1 that support your learning and practice.

Inclusive recruitment and outreach

Recruiting First Nations staff takes more than broad advertising – it requires rethinking how roles are designed, promoted, assessed, and supported. Recruitment should be culturally safe, relationship-based, and tailored to local contexts.

A culturally safe process builds trust from the beginning. It values lived experience, offers flexibility, and removes unnecessary barriers. It also acknowledges the ongoing impact of exclusion and discrimination on how First Nations peoples experience recruitment today.

Rethinking recruitment: creating culturally safe pathways

Inclusive recruitment goes beyond advertising – it's about designing roles and processes that reflect and respect First Nations strengths, experiences, and ways of working.

Design roles that reflect strengths

- Make roles flexible and relevant
- Where cultural knowledge or lived experience is key, remove unnecessary qualifications
- Support part-time, seasonal, or project-based work, and allow cultural leave
- Recognise skills gained through community leadership, land care, or cultural practice
- Use identified positions where appropriate, following legal guidelines

Build relationships first

- Strong recruitment starts with connection
- Engage early with local communities, ACCOs, schools, TAFEs, and training providers
- Co-design roles or entry pathways with partners
- Host information sessions in community settings to build trust and support applications

Advertise through trusted networks

- Use plain language and clearly state your commitment to cultural safety
- Share roles through trusted First Nations networks – like Koori Mail, Indigenous job boards, ACCOs, and local Facebook groups – not just mainstream platforms
- Offer flexible application formats, such as phone or video
- Share interview questions ahead of time and accept storytelling or practical examples.
- Include First Nations representation on selection panels where possible.
- Respect different communication styles, and apply background checks with cultural and systemic awareness

Beyond recruitment: investing in long-term careers

Recruitment should open the door to lasting career opportunities. Employers can help grow strong, culturally safe pathways by:

- Partnering with ACCOs, RTOs, TAFEs, and universities to create cadetships, traineeships, and pre-employment programs
- Offering paid work experience, job shadowing, and school-based apprenticeships
- Supporting graduate programs with strong cultural frameworks
- Connecting with Indigenous youth and education initiatives early
- Helping people transition into new sectors with flexible roles and support
- Creating visible pathways for advancement, including mentoring and identified leadership roles

By investing in early support and long-term progression, recruitment becomes more than hiring – it becomes a path to leadership.

Key takeaway

Recruitment is your first signal of cultural safety. A process that is accessible, relational, and strengths-based will attract not just more applicants – but the right ones (see [4. Inclusive recruitment checklist](#) in the Appendix).



Culturally safe onboarding

Key principles for culturally safe onboarding

Onboarding is a crucial moment where trust is made or lost. For First Nations staff, it shapes whether their cultural identity is respected and supported, or if they feel pressured to “fit in” to unsafe norms. A culturally safe onboarding process affirms identity, builds support, and sets staff up for long-term success.

Key principles and what it looks like in practice

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

Two-way learning

Supervisors and team members are prepared to listen and learn from the employee's knowledge and lived experience

Peer and community support

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

Key takeaway

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

Welcoming new First Nations staff

Before day one

- Assign a cultural mentor or buddy, ideally with cultural awareness and knowledge of the role and workplace
- Ensure all key staff 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

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

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

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

See [5. Culturally safe onboarding checklist](#) in the Appendix to ensure you are following this!

Supporting and retaining First Nations staff

Cultural safety is not just about policies or training – it is felt daily in how people and culture are respected. A culturally safe workplace lets First Nations staff be themselves, contribute fully, and lead if they choose.

Embed cultural safety in systems

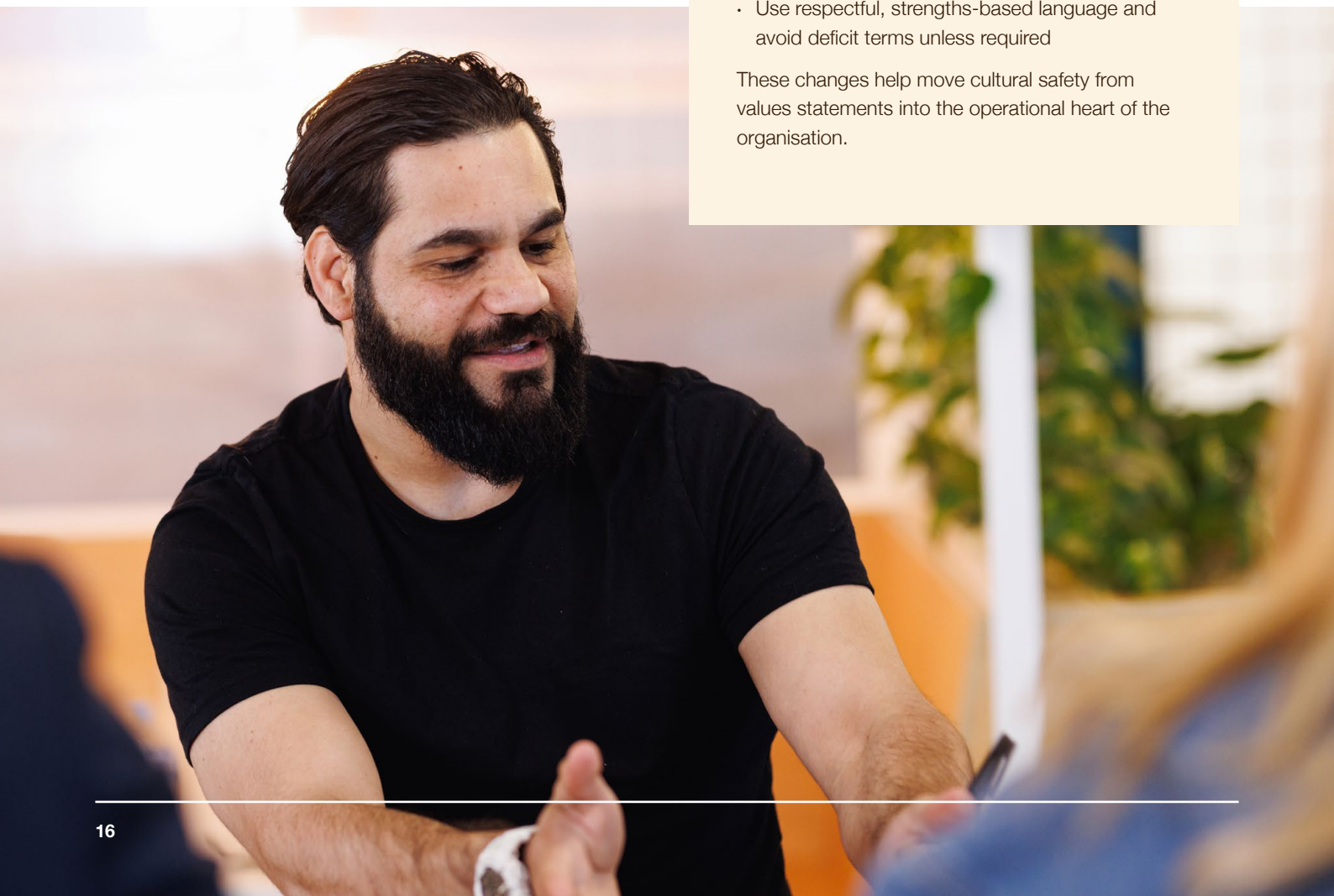
Review policies like leave, performance reviews, and dress codes through a cultural lens. Provide cultural leave for Sorry Business and ceremonies, flexible work for community commitments, and support persons during performance or disciplinary processes. Use strengths-based language and allow cultural expression in uniforms or dress.

Examples of applying a cultural lens to daily practice

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

- Offer cultural leave with a simple process for Sorry Business, ceremony, and family needs
- Provide flexible work to support community and cultural commitments
- Allow support people (e.g. Elders, cultural mentors) in formal processes and ensure safe, trauma-aware ways to raise concerns
- Use performance reviews that value cultural leadership and contributions, not just KPIs
- Support cultural expression through inclusive dress policies
- Use respectful, strengths-based language and avoid deficit terms unless required

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



Nurture and retain leaders

Retention means creating a space where First Nations staff thrive, lead, and grow. High turnover often comes from cultural isolation, lack of progression, unrecognised cultural burdens, or inflexible systems. Address these by recognising cultural load, building trust through action, and investing in development.

Address common challenges

- Cultural isolation: Being the only First Nations person without peer support
- Lack of cultural safety: Practices that undermine identity or protocols
- Unrecognised cultural load: Expecting staff to lead cultural work without support
- Limited progression: Feeling stuck in entry roles
- Inflexible systems: Not accommodating cultural or family obligations

Support career growth

Offer development plans, training, leadership opportunities, and avoid limiting staff to only cultural liaison roles unless they want to.

Create culturally safe performance and support

Train supervisors in trauma-aware, culturally safe management. Focus on well-being and cultural identity, include cultural contributions in reviews, allow mentors or Elders to participate in discussions, and provide safe feedback channels. Adapt leave to cultural needs and offer access to culturally safe well-being services.

Employers can help First Nations staff feel valued and stay long-term by embedding cultural safety in everyday practice and supporting growth.

Recognise and manage colonial 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

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

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. (see [6. Cultural safety policy audit tool](#) for more conversation and learning!)

Committing to cultural safety and long-term accountability

Turning commitment into sustained change

Cultural safety needs more than good intentions – it needs accountability. This means tracking progress, listening to feedback, and taking action. For employers, it is how cultural safety becomes part of everyday practice, not just a goal. It also means being answerable to First Nations communities, not just your own measures or public image.

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 strong accountability approach balances data with stories. Numbers matter, but they need to be supported by real experiences that give context and meaning.

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).

Transparency and shared responsibility

Transparency builds trust by openly sharing progress and challenges on cultural safety in internal reports and public commitments. This includes setting clear goals for First Nations employment, retention, and procurement, being honest when things fall short, and outlining how improvements will be made. Sharing what's been learned also helps drive change across the sector.

Responsibility for cultural safety must be shared across teams, leaders, and business units. It's not the sole job of a First Nations staff member, a network, or a RAP committee.

Creating safe feedback mechanisms

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

- Offer anonymous or low-barrier options like surveys, check-ins, or suggestion boxes
- Create safe, supported spaces where mob can speak freely
- Accept feedback in culturally appropriate ways, not just in writing
- Clearly explain how feedback will be used, and follow up with updates
- Take cultural safety concerns seriously, even when they cause discomfort

Feedback systems should protect trust, not damage it. They must support honesty, learning, and change – especially when things go wrong.

Key takeaway

Accountability turns values into outcomes.

When built into leadership, systems, and culture, it helps retain First Nations staff, build trust, and achieve stronger, community-based results.

(See [7. Accountability pulse check](#) in the Appendix 1 for further discussion)

Partnerships with First Nations peoples and businesses

Procurement as a lever for equity and long-term impact

Procurement is a powerful way to support First Nations economic participation across sectors. Good procurement strategies support First Nations self-determination, create jobs and economic opportunities, strengthen partnerships with local communities, build trust through community-led delivery, and bring cultural knowledge into supply chains and project outcomes. When done strategically, it can create lasting community benefits, grow First Nations businesses, and boost organisational credibility.

Many employers engage with Indigenous Procurement Policy (IPP) targets, but these are just a starting point. To create real value, procurement should be seen as a relationship, not just a transaction. This means looking beyond spend to measure impact — like jobs created, businesses supported, and knowledge shared. Involving First Nations businesses early in a project, not just at the tender stage, helps build stronger partnerships, trust, and future employment pathways

Principles and practice examples

Accessible and fair

Keep tender processes simple and clear. Use plain English and consider breaking contracts into smaller, more manageable parts.

Respected and protected

Engage early to build mutual understanding. Include Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) clauses, ensure proper attribution, and uphold data sovereignty.

Safe and supported

Create culturally safe environments for First Nations contractors. Track both financial spend and meaningful outcomes, such as job creation, partnerships, and community benefits.

Co-design

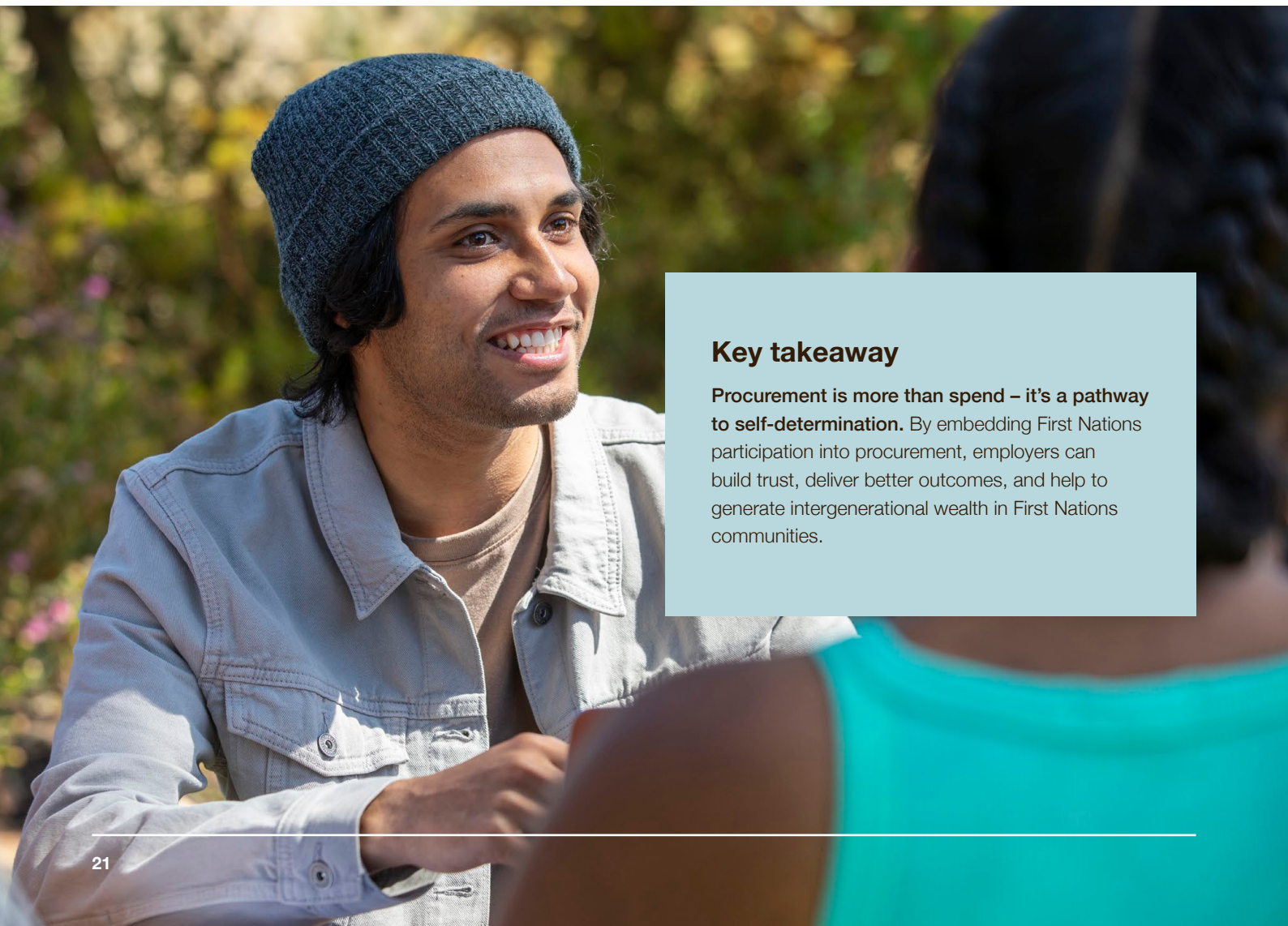
Work with local community partners to co-design project scopes. Be flexible with timelines to align with cultural protocols and community priorities.

Build stronger partnerships not just contracts

Procurement works best when it is built on strong relationships, not just transactions. First Nations businesses bring much more than services – they are community leaders, cultural knowledge holders, and local employers.

Employers can help grow lasting partnerships in several ways. They can work together on multi-year or framework agreements. They can explore co-bidding or joint delivery models. Connecting through First Nations business expos also builds relationships. Most importantly, they can ask, *“How can we support this business beyond the contract?”*

Want to embed First Nations participation into your procurement system? See [*8. First Nations procurement planning checklist*](#) in the Appendix for ideas!



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.

Safe and meaningful community engagement

Engage early, meaningfully and respectfully

Many workplaces operate on or in relationship with First Nations Country, have services or activities that affect First Nations peoples and communities. These often have direct and lasting impacts – culturally, socially, economically, or environmentally.

Meaningful community engagement is vital for the cultural safety and wellbeing of both the local community and First Nations staff. Without it, staff may face harm, isolation, or conflict between their cultural and professional roles.

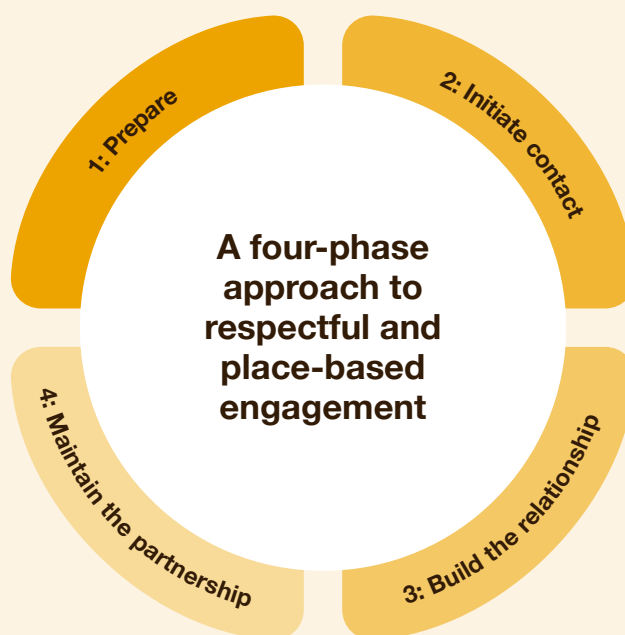
This section outlines how to shift from transactional consultation to genuine, ongoing partnership with First Nations communities.

Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC)

Culturally safe work and engagement requires a commitment to relationship-led, place-based, and grounded in respect for local leadership and knowledge.

A commitment to Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC), as outlined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), means First Nations peoples have the time, information, and authority to decide how and if work proceed in ways that uphold their rights, responsibilities, and connection to Country.





Phase	What to do	Principles to apply
1. Prepare	- Identify whose Country your work takes place on - Map key stakeholders (e.g. Traditional Owners, PBCs, Land Councils, ACCOs) - Allocate time and budget for cultural protocol adherence	- Start early, not after design is complete - Respect cultural leadership and include those with connection to Country, even without formal land rights
2. Initiate contact	- Use the appropriate cultural channels - Request meetings on Country - Begin by listening, not pitching	- Engagement is relational, not transactional - Transparency builds trust
3. Build the relationship	- Share clear project info (e.g. visuals, plain English, translated materials) - Acknowledge cultural obligations and timing - Compensate people for their time and advice	- Respect timeframes (e.g. Sorry Business) - Ensure mutual benefit and shared outcomes
4. Maintain the partnership	- Provide updates throughout implementation of work activities - Establish ongoing advisory forums. Support benefit-sharing, local jobs or training - Celebrate contributions	- 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 allow for engagement, ceremony, and cultural protocols
- Budget for engagement (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

Do you want to have a chat about what your workplace is already doing and how it can do better? See [9: Community engagement readiness checklist](#) in the Appendix.

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 point in time commitment – it's an ongoing way of working.

Done well, it builds trust, strengthens outcomes, and creates lasting value for communities, staff, and work success.

Conclusion – thrive together

A shared opportunity, a shared responsibility

Across all sectors, workplaces 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 systemic change that is inclusive, culturally grounded, and led by First Nations knowledge and leadership.



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 partnerships**, such as First Nations employment networks, training hubs, and mentoring initiatives
- **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

Cultural safety is not a checklist – it is a long-term shift in how your organisation leads, listens and works. Meaningful progress happens when actions are grounded in relationships, supported by systems, and accountable to First Nations people.



Appendix 1:

Tools and checklists

1. 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)

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

This exercise can be used as part of onboarding for senior leaders, during leadership retreats, or integrated into regular performance and culture reviews.

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?

2. Reflective exercise for executives and leadership teams

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.



3. 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?

4. 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			

5. 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			

6. 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.			

7. 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?	

8. First Nations procurement planning checklist

Use during annual planning or service review processes

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)?			

9. Community engagement readiness checklist

For planning culturally safe programs, services, projects or partnerships

Question	Yes	No	Notes / Actions
Have we identified the Traditional Owners of the land this work takes place 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 work not just reacting to it?			
Are we offering appropriate recognition or compensation for contributions?			
Do we have a plan for maintaining relationships during and after the activity?			

