

5 LEADERSHIP



Effective leadership is critical for achieving better social, economic and cultural outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Strong governance and strong leadership are directly linked.

While governance is about more than just leadership, without visionary and accountable leaders your governance can quickly become ineffective.

WHAT IS LEADERSHIP AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

“Leaders are essentially creatures of habit. They don’t really do extraordinary things that often. They do ordinary things often and consistently and persistently ... Good leaders keep turning up, they’re there, ... regardless of how overwhelming the opposition seems, from both in and outside.”

-Mick Dodson, Chair, Indigenous Governance Awards, presentation to Mt Isa Sharing Success Workshop, September 2007

Leaders can either undermine their nation or organisation, or they can inspire people and foster commitment and cooperation.

Leadership is the art of motivating and guiding a group of people to act towards achieving a common goal.

It is not just for people at the top. Building collective leadership from the bottom up is important.

EFFECTIVE, LEGITIMATE LEADERSHIP

Effective leadership is about the wise use of power.

The legitimacy of leaders is stronger and more sustained when they gain the respect and trust of their members, and when there is open communication with these members.

Effective, legitimate leadership means:

- acting with a set of shared values and standards of behaviour in mind
- being accountable, fair and inclusive
- understanding and carrying out given responsibilities
- inspiring people to work together
- recognising your own weaknesses and strengths
- understanding the limitations to your role
- knowing when to seek further expertise
- helping your nation, communities and/or organisations achieve their goals.

ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER LEADERSHIP

The English terms 'leadership' and 'leader' may be a foreign concepts in many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership is exercised according to different values than it is in the wider Australian society. Strong relationships with family and close kin, and values of demand sharing and mutual responsibility are at the very heart of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership practices.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership is complex because:

- it is shared amongst people who have different responsibilities for different matters
- there are important age and gender dimensions
- it is hierarchical, based on accumulating knowledge and experience
- not all leaders are equally powerful—some are more influential than others.

For example, senior women often have significant authority within their own groups. But their leadership may not always be as visible as men who often are the ones working on the governing bodies of incorporated organisations and interacting with external stakeholders.



STEPPING UP: YOUR LEADERSHIP VALUES AND QUALITIES

A leader's style—that is, the way they put their values, personal qualities, vision and sense of purpose into action—can make a difference to their own and other people's performance and accomplishments.

It's important to understand your own values and qualities as a leader.

Values may include integrity, fairness, and strength.

Qualities and skills identified by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as important in their leaders include:

- respect for culture
- self-awareness and confidence
- integrity and wisdom
- support for all your people
- clear communication and direction
- good mediation and negotiation skills
- enthusiasm and ability to inspire
- adaptability and humility
- a sense of humour.

EVALUATING YOUR LEADERSHIP

So much depends on your leadership in the context of governance. So it is critical to keep an eye on how you are being effective and legitimate in your leadership practice.

Community and group members also have to keep their leaders accountable.

YOUTH LEADERSHIP AND SUCCESSION PLANNING

Young people have much to contribute as they add energy, enthusiasm and a fresh perspective.

“Make sure you have a succession plan in place and that young leaders can contribute their new ideas now, not later. Too often charismatic leaders have been amazingly successful, but when they retire or fail in their leadership bid, the community falls apart. Leaders build for the future by mentoring youth who will carry on their good work long into the future.”

-Neil Sterritt, The trials and legacies of Mabo and Delhamuukw: Converting rights into outcomes for Australian and Canadian First Nations Peoples, Keynote presentation to Native Title Conference, Cairns 2012, p 40

Succession planning is about ensuring there are experienced and well-trained leaders to guide a nation, community or organisation in the future. Leaders today need to mentor and develop the leaders of tomorrow.

To meet contemporary governance challenges, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations and groups need to be able to grow their own young talented leaders, managers, negotiators and politicians, and give them real support and real roles.

BUILDING FUTURE LEADERSHIP CAPACITY TO GOVERN

Leadership for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance is a specialist area of expertise. The invitation and desire to serve must be supported by the capacity and confidence to do so.

Important capacities for effective governance

The capacity to work with others
The capacity to define a vision and consensus
The capacity to create and enforce rules and strategies
The capacity to manage
The capacity to assess and implement plans and goals
The capacity to provide and support strong local, culturally legitimate leadership

Supported by senior leaders, emerging leaders need to be exposed to critical experiences, build their own skills, and acquire the trust and recognition they will need from their own people.

For more information, please see the Indigenous Governance Toolkit: toolkit.aigi.com.au

