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INDIGENOUS-INCLUSIVE FLEXIBLE WORK: TIPS FOR MANAGERS

WHY INDIGENOUS-INCLUSIVE FLEXIBLE WORK MATTERS

Providing flexible work that is Indigenous-inclusive shows Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees that your organisation:

- recognises caring for family and kin of all types, community, culture, and Country is a core part of many Indigenous employees' lives,

- enables Indigenous employees to maintain strong connections to culture, community and Country while contributing at work, and

- won't require them to choose between work and fulfilling their duty to mob and community cultural protocols.

This is a win–win outcome for employees and organisations alike – it supports Indigenous employees' wellbeing, retention, and ability to contribute fully at work.

START BY LEARNING ABOUT INDIGENOUS WAYS OF CARING

For flexible work to really work for Indigenous people, it's critical to understand Indigenous ways of caring for kin, community, and Country. While caring practices among Indigenous peoples vary widely, some common characteristics of Indigenous ways of caring are below.

Caring as a Cultural Strength not a Burden. Many non-Indigenous employers treat unpaid care as a "burden" that keeps people from being productive at work. But for many Indigenous people, caring for family, community, and Country is not a chore to be minimised or outsourced but a cultural strength and expression of culture.[1]

Caring for Kin. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are based on kinship systems. These define how people are connected, care for one another, and fulfil shared responsibilities.

- **'Family' is broad.** Family extends well beyond the nuclear household to include extended family, clan and community – so Indigenous employees might be caring for parents, aunties and uncles, younger siblings, nieces and nephews, cousins, partners' children, Elders, and/or those with disabilities or chronic health issues.

- **Caring responsibilities are broad.** It's common for Indigenous people to share care for family/ community members. Indigenous employees are therefore more likely than non-Indigenous employees to be carers, often for multiple family/community members.[2]

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Caring for Sorry Business. Sorry Business refers to the cultural responsibilities Indigenous people may have when mourning the loss of a loved one from the broad community the person belongs to.

- **Cultural responsibilities.** Kinship determines who attends Sorry Business, who organises or supports funerals, and who provides cultural, emotional or practical care. It often involves the wider community, not just immediate family.

- **Cultural importance.** Because whole communities may be expected to attend Sorry Business, Indigenous people may need to take time away from work, and not attending can cause distress or be seen as disrespectful.

- **Greater flexibility.** Indigenous employees may need greater flexibility or more leave than non-Indigenous employees. Sorry Business occurs more often in Indigenous communities due to higher rates of early death[3] and large kinship networks. Significant travel is also often required when family and community members live off-Country.

Caring for Culture and Country. For many Indigenous people, caring responsibilities include cultural and custodial obligations to Country and culture.

- **Cultural responsibilities.** Country is not something to own but something living that people have a responsibility to care for. Caring may include maintaining cultural knowledge, fulfilling kinship-based custodial roles, and cultural land management.

- **Cultural importance.** Caring for Country isn't optional – it's a core responsibility handed down across generations and is vital to keeping culture alive.

Connected Caring (Work-Community). Many workplace policies are based on a non-Indigenous Western idea that work and personal life can be kept separate.

- **When work and life overlap.** But sometimes Indigenous people work in jobs where their professional responsibilities are closely connected to and overlap with community, cultural, and kinship responsibilities. In these roles, attempting to separate 'work' and 'personal life' may undermine their ability to do their job effectively.

- **For example,** Aboriginal Health Workers and Aboriginal Education Workers might work beyond formal hours or outside the workplace to support families and kinship networks to navigate unfamiliar and culturally unsafe health or education systems.

- **To be inclusive**, we need to value Indigenous employees' care work and cultural skills as real assets that make important contributions at work and in community.

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Caring to Counter Ongoing Harms of Colonisation. To create genuinely inclusive and flexible workplaces, we need to recognise:

- **The great and ongoing damage colonisation has caused** in the lives of Indigenous people – including less access to services (e.g. education, health, housing) and frequent experiences of racism when services are accessed.[4]

- **This has consequences for caring** as when institutions fail to provide culturally safe and effective services, Indigenous people are often forced to take on additional caring responsibilities for family and community.

MAKE INDIGENOUS-INCLUSIVE DECISIONS

Recognise Indigenous caring responsibilities may go beyond immediate family to extended family/community. Treat flexibility requests for this care with the same seriousness and respect as non-Indigenous employees' requests for care of immediate family. Avoid making decisions based on non-Indigenous Western ideas about caregiving and family.

Think fair treatment not same treatment. Sometimes we need to treat people differently to be fair (that is, to provide the same opportunity).[5]

- **Different circumstances.** Indigenous employees may sometimes need different types of flexible work to non-Indigenous employees (e.g. cultural bereavement leave) due to having different life responsibilities (e.g. Sorry Business).

- **Same opportunity.** Without this flexibility, Indigenous staff may be unfairly disadvantaged by being forced to choose between their cultural responsibilities and their job – a choice non-Indigenous employees would not have to make.

Appreciate diversity among Indigenous employees. Recognise Indigenous employees' flexibility needs vary, as do those of non-Indigenous employees. For example:

Lead with compassion at times of loss. Treat flexibility requests to attend to Sorry Business with understanding and compassion.

- **Understand cultural duties.** Treat leave requests to attend funerals for Indigenous community members as legitimate cultural responsibilities, not personal preferences.

- **Avoid questioning the relationship** of the deceased or the necessity of attending to Sorry Business. Recognise that the family and community members with cultural authority are responsible for deciding who is considered kin.

- **Greater flexibility may be needed.** Recognise Indigenous employees may require greater flexibility or longer leave for Sorry Business than non-Indigenous employees.

Attending Sorry Business often involves significant travel, as family/community members may live off-Country. Additionally, higher rates of early death[6] and larger kinship networks mean that Sorry Business occurs more often in Indigenous communities.

View caring for Country and community as cultural duty and real work – not just personal time off. Consider offering additional unpaid leave for significant, longer-term cultural obligations.

Check whether employment security is affecting flex access. Aboriginal-identified roles are often temporary, casual, or short-term contract. This can prevent Indigenous employees from requesting and advocating for flexible work as they fear losing their job.

Avoid the trap of 'boss-based flexibility.' A key barrier to accessing flexible work is when this relies only on the discretion of individual managers. For Indigenous employees, managers' decisions can be shaped by unconscious biases such as racial stereotypes and limited understanding of Indigenous cultural and caring responsibilities.[7] To avoid this:

- **build your cultural awareness** about racial biases and stereotypes that Indigenous employees regularly experience, and

- **try an 'All Roles Flex'[8] approach** to flexible work, started by Telstra in 2014 but now common practice in leading practice employers.

Think Flexible Careers. Ensure Indigenous employees working flexibly are offered career opportunities. Often Indigenous employees are pigeon-holed into low level roles with little flexibility and no career prospects. This happens as Indigenous employees often face:

- **out-dated assumptions** that all senior roles require physical presence five days a week in a metropolitan office,

- **career-limiting stereotypes** that question their competence, ambition, and suitability for leadership, and

- **greater scrutiny** and performance expectations than their white counterparts.[9]

CREATE AN INDIGENOUS-INCLUSIVE TEAM CULTURE

Consider team inclusion. 50% of Indigenous employees report that co-workers react negatively when Indigenous colleagues take cultural leave.[10] To cultivate inclusion, address any issues promptly when they occur and encourage team-wide learning – for example:

- **organise** a cultural awareness workshop led by Indigenous facilitators,

- **share** books or podcasts by Indigenous people, and/or

- **recognise** important dates (e.g. NAIDOC Week, National Sorry Day).

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Avoid unfair workplace demands. Avoid relying on Indigenous employees to educate the team unless they voluntarily choose to participate. This just creates extra work that Indigenous employees are usually not recognised or rewarded for.[11]

Build trust – avoid hyper-surveillance. Be mindful that Indigenous employees often experience unjustified greater scrutiny, surveillance, and suspicion in the workplace, compared to their non-Indigenous colleagues.[12] To avoid this:

- **proactively address** the racial biases and inaccurate stereotypes that fuel suspicion,
- **normalise access** to flexible work options, and
- **encourage a culture** of productivity versus presence.

Encourage a culture of productivity versus presence. Focus on outcomes not rigid hours when assessing performance. This helps emphasise what really matters – contributions, impact, and results – rather than presence alone.

Trial an 'All Roles Flex' approach to flexible work. Make flexibility standard practice rather than an exception in your team. Industry guidelines like _Future-Flex: Mainstreaming Flexibility by Team Design_[13] explain how this can be done. For example:

- **ask** your team – how can all team members have more flexibility in when they work (Flex-Time), when they take leave (Flex-Leave), or where they work (Flex-Place)?
- **ask** your team to review their suggested flexible work options to find how these can be implemented to maintain or positively impact individual, team, and business outcomes,
- **encourage** your team to challenge inaccurate assumptions about flexible work (e.g. that flexible workers are less committed, flexible work is not possible in our industry),
- **pilot, monitor, and refine** your flexible work options over time.

Continue building your Indigenous-inclusive leadership capabilities. Not only will this further build your people management capabilities, it reduces the burden on Indigenous team members to continually explain or justify their workplace needs.

- **Register** to receive CIPW's evidence-based Indigenous employment guides and events by clicking on this link.
- **Read** CIPW's Indigenous-Inclusive Flexible Work Guide and share with colleagues.
- **Learn** about and participate in significant cultural events and dates (e.g. NAIDOC Week, Sorry Day, National Reconciliation Week).
- **Encourage** and support staff who want to participate in these events.
- **Attend** cultural awareness, cultural safety, or anti-racism training.

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