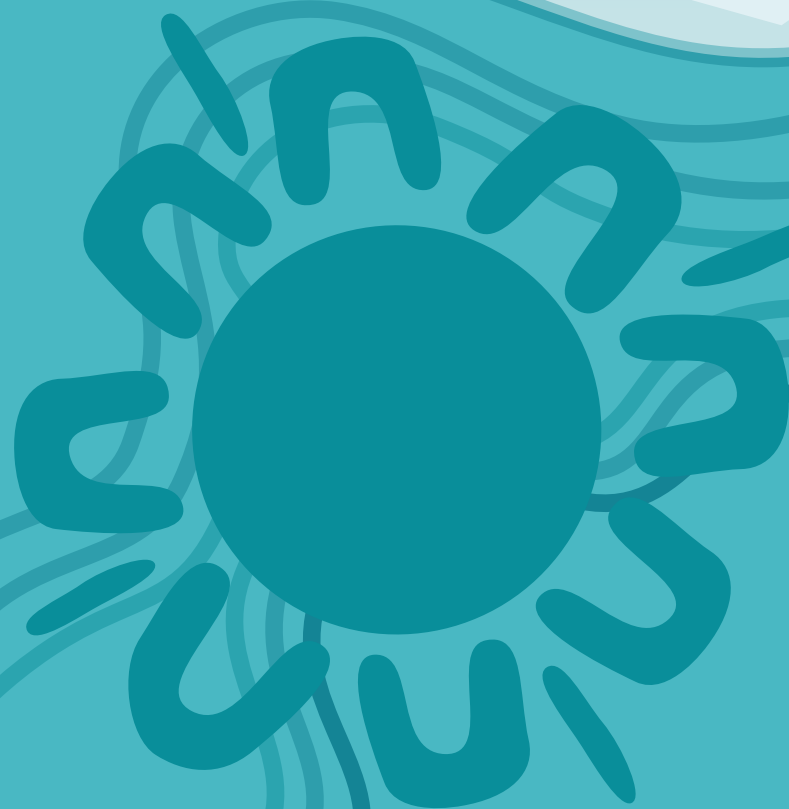


How is First Nations success shaped? Tips on providing culturally appropriate career advice.



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We all want a good job with a good wage, right? Sure, but our definitions of 'good' aren't always the same. And who is the 'we' referred to by each of us? It's important that we all understand each other's perspectives to support our whole community in achieving everyone's employment goals.

In this place called Australia, terms like 'we' or 'everyone' often reference only those who sit inside the White Australian identity framework. We are *all* colonised in our thinking and understanding of this Australian community, and we need to move beyond this. When I work with people around ideas of unlearning and decolonisation, I think of William Glasser's Choice Theory/Reality Therapy and the tension caused by the gap between what we want to be true and what is true.

I use the terms 'colony', 'colonised' and 'colonial' to refer to the governmental systems in place and to the thinking that has been taught to us as people raised in these systems. I use the term First Nations to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples – the hundreds of language groups across this continent.

Where you may have one story; I have two. I am Wiradyuri/Gamileroi and speak from my experience and knowledge. While this is broadly familiar and similar for other First Nations groups, it is best to seek advice directly from Elders within your community or location. You are welcome to use the ideas I share as a starting point for those conversations.

Cultural values

Every culture has core values that shape social structure, and these values are passed on to their children. Individuals are shaped by the cultural values of their social group and these values determine our wants and needs (remembering that wants and needs are also different things).

Let's start with the value of money. This is not the same in all communities. For many Australians, their net worth dictates their social standing – where they can afford to live, their holidays, hobbies and possessions. This is capitalist culture that has us all 'keeping up with the Joneses'.

In comparison, there are small First Nations communities dotted throughout our society that look, and are, very different. Figure 1 shows our core values. Wellbeing for the mob comes first – for all of us, not one or some of us. Knowledge is held by many and resources are shared.

You will find that First Nations people are filled with stories they will be excited to tell you if you are genuinely interested in hearing them.

Even now, the stories of First Nations people, including children, are often dismissed. Or the listener may intend to find something negative that can be used against a family or community. We have a pretty good radar for this after many generations in the colony, so if you are being trusted with some good yarns, please treat them and their storyteller with the respect they deserve.

The cornerstone of the relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and Country is reciprocity. That means mutual respect, maintaining balance, and nurturing the connection, taking only what is needed to ensure the natural resources of the world are never exhausted. A common expression is 'healthy Country, healthy people'.

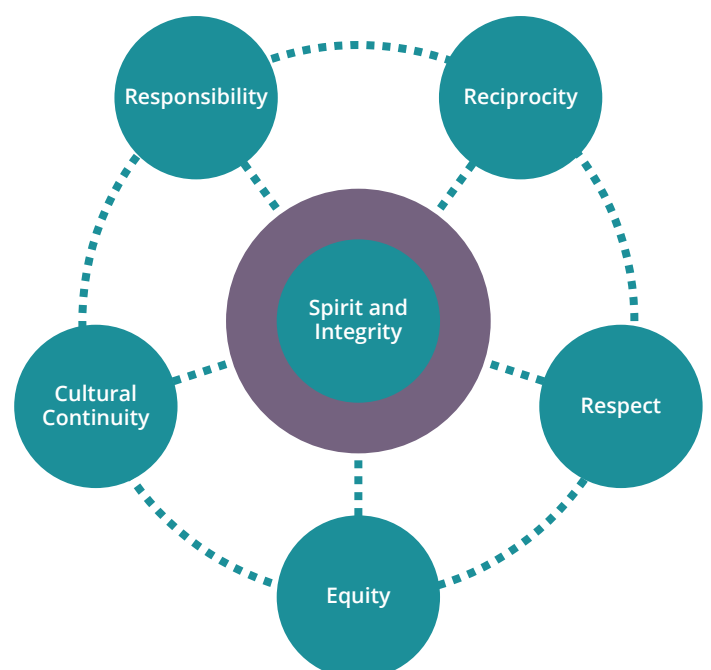


Figure 1: First Nations core values

How does all this relate to employment choices?

Focusing on wellbeing for the mob and thinking about all those gaps that need closing, we can see why First Nations people choose the jobs they do. These are often in the areas of social work, aged care, mental health care, drug and alcohol counselling, nursing, teaching, community development, Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) casework and government liaison. These have been the mainstays of employment in this period of increased educational access for First Nations peoples. We are driven to develop skills that allow us to take care of mob in the communities we are living in, using the systems we are forced to operate within and where we know ongoing harm is experienced. We have been able to shift slightly from a position of pure survival to one where we can offer support and enact change from within. These employment choices are reflected in the data coming out of ABS census processes.

Changing the conversations

As anyone who has tried to make change from within an organisation will know, it's hard going. Change only really occurs when you can influence the system from the hegemonic and legislative domains. Happily, young First Nations people are increasingly taking up the challenges of research, academia, medicine and law. They are starting to shape the systems we operate within, using our knowledge as Australians to bring about positive change that might actually move us towards closing those gaps in health, education, justice and life expectations.

From 2024, the application of strategies to significantly increase the number of First Nations PhDs will begin. The goal is to recognise, more broadly, the knowledge and skills First Nations peoples bring to the learning and teaching of others, and to the development of new and existing industries and professions. In all our roles, First Nations people are introducing a deeper understanding of the value of reciprocity and reciprocal relationships, and embedding the underpinning the concept of community wellbeing through the use of shared knowledge and resources.

How is First Nations success shaped?

Step 1: It is community-based If you are developing a program or activity for a community that you are not involved with, stop yourself now. Go and talk to Elders and other people in that community – hear their thoughts and ideas. Since colonisation First Nations people have been subjected to the 'deficit discourse' of Australian media and politicians. But First Nations people don't need saving or fixing – we need to participate in our solutions. Think of it this way: if I walked into your house without so much as a knock at the door and told you I have the solution to all your problems, what would you be thinking?

Step 2: It identifies community and individual strengths and interests What is your local community most

engaged with, interested in and wanting to contribute towards? Priorities may be relationships and family, education, disability, law and order, physical health and sport, mental and spiritual health, creative and expressive arts or communications. School is a means to an end. It has historically treated First Nations community members poorly. It has been a place of segregation, isolation and humiliation. Colonial education is largely irrelevant to the needs of First Nations learners until relevant specialisations can become the focus. This is why VET/TAFE and Higher Education tend to be accessed later in life, often from the mid-20s onwards. What is being accessed by the community you are working with? Within its scope of operations, how can your school identify these connections when supporting students in making plans for their futures?

Step 3: It sets relevant goals When developing SMART goals with young First Nations learners, understand that life is a path we walk, one that is determined by those that came before us, and that will affect those that come after us. What we do next isn't necessarily all we will do. Focus on the development of transferable skills and flexible career development. Forward planning should be tangible and stepped out and identify support systems and key people along the way.

In my experience, First Nations people change employment based on the shifting needs of self, family and community. Employment is a flexible thing that plays a supporting role. The capacity to change and correct your course is key. Mistakes are made but we are open to forgiveness and moving forward. Success is a cycle, or a series of valleys and peaks. We can never be on top all the time, but we are achieving success if we can find the path back and support others to do so. Working collaboratively to achieve individual and community goals is an example of reciprocity in action.

Step 4: It fosters active and equal partnerships We have greater success and more positive life outcomes when we can support ourselves and make decisions and improvements in our own communities and lives. Partnership is equal. Partnership means done with, not done to or for. Work with us so that we can develop the skills and knowledge to implement our own solutions. Partnership holds power in the development of self-determination: to make our own decisions about our own lives, we need our communities to be educated and skilled.

Step 5: It engages deeply with community When skilled First Nations workers and professionals are working within First Nations communities with First Nations people to solve First Nations issues, we will have safe, trusting and positive community engagement and participation. To achieve this, we must support learners to become what they want to be, according to the values their communities have raised them to know and respect. First Nations people learn to speak for themselves at a young age. We know what our communities need and want – please listen. First Nations people need you to help find the path and show how the system works so we can navigate our own ways.

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