Interactive Ochre – A workplace guide

Traditional Aspects

- Australian Aboriginal Society has the longest continuous cultural history in the world. Its origins date back at least 50,000 years possibly 70,000 years or since the beginning of time in the Dreaming.

- The relationship to the land is considered fundamental to the well-being of Aboriginal people, individually and collectively. The relationship with the land is a spiritually connection.

- In Aboriginal communities there is a ‘need to accept customs and laws’.

- Aboriginal Elders are viewed by their communities with respect. They are the holders of information and knowledge. It is often expected by the community that staff members also respect these people and acknowledge their position.

- For many Aboriginal people it is considered impolite to make eye contact with people. Avoiding eye contact is polite behaviour and is regarded as a sign of respect by Aboriginal people.

- For non-Aboriginal people avoiding eye contact can be difficult as it is not a natural response. In many situations sitting next to the person rather than opposite them can limit eye contact.

- There are differences between those with ‘traditional’ culture and ‘non-traditional’ — some Aboriginal people do not place significance on that aspect of culture and do use eye contact.

- Aboriginal Australia consists of approximately three hundred groups each with their own country, stories, languages or dialects, and traditions.


- Work teams need to be aware of inappropriate tasks for men and women where the community designates ‘men’s business’ or ‘women’s business’.

- Aboriginal people have a very strong sense of kinship. Family ties and connections are very important and families share resources and care for relatives. Decisions will often be made from a family or clan perspective.

- In Aboriginal communities take care what you ask about — be cautious and don’t pry.

- Be aware of the use of hand signals and other non-verbal cues commonly utilised.

Health and Services Issues

- Specialised medical, legal and educational services are needed for Aboriginal people to ensure the most appropriate and accessible service is provided.

- Due to gender-specific preferences — especially in regard to health issues — Aboriginal people may require treatment by same gender staff (e.g. some senior men may not find it appropriate to be treated by female practitioners).

- The need for Aboriginal services is also supported by statistics which indicate that Aboriginal people are worse off than any other identifiable group of Australians. Statistics from the Australian Bureau of Statistics include:
  - Aboriginal people die on average 15-20 years earlier than non-Aboriginal people and are far more likely to suffer from infectious disease or chronic disease such as diabetes, renal failure, heart disease and hypertension, trachoma and ear disease.
  - Only 2.6% of the Indigenous population is aged 65 years or over.
  - Coronary heart disease — the risk of occurrence is 3-4 times higher for Indigenous males and females.
- Stroke — the risk of occurrence is 3-4 times higher for Indigenous males and 2.5-3.6 times higher for Indigenous females.
- Rheumatic heart disease — the risk of occurrence is 27 times higher for Indigenous males and 23 times higher for Indigenous females.
- Other cardiovascular disease — the risk of occurrence is 3-4.5 times higher for Indigenous males and females.
- Type 2 diabetes has been recognised as one of the most significant health problems for Indigenous populations across Australia, with the overall prevalence approximately four times that of the general population.


- Large proportions of Aboriginal people do not drink alcohol:
  - Up to 35% of Aboriginal males do not drink alcohol at all compared with 12% of non-Aboriginal males.
  - Between 40-80% of Aboriginal females do not drink compared to 19-25% of non-Aboriginal females.
  - Surveys have shown however that Aboriginal people who do drink tend to do so in excess. This is often highlighted by the fact that many Aboriginal people drink in public places or in the open — not like their non-Aboriginal counterparts who drink behind closed doors.
  - In many areas the communities have decided to have alcohol-free zones. They are called ‘Dry Communities’.
- The high prevalence of health risk factors found among the Indigenous population reflects the broader social and economic disadvantages faced by Aboriginal people.
- The health risk factors summarised briefly are smoking, physical inactivity, and psychological and sociological issues. Smoking heightens the risks by affecting the functioning of the arteries, physical inactivity contributes to increased weight gain, and psychological and sociological risk factors stem from social inequalities and influence the prevalence of other risk factors.
- Inadequate housing has been identified as a major factor affecting the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- Indigenous youth face extreme difficulties in Australia today. A vast divide in life opportunity exists between Indigenous Australians, and the general population in Australia. Statistics suggest
  - Indigenous youth are the most educationally disadvantaged.
  - 63% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people over 15 years of age are overweight or obese.
  - 49% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 18 years and over were smokers.
  - 59% of Indigenous Australians aged 13 years and above identify alcohol as ‘one of the main health problems’ faced by their communities and 30% identify ‘drugs’ as a problem.
  - Unemployment rates were highest for Indigenous people aged 15-17 years (31.8%) and 18-24 years (27.3%).
  - The number of Indigenous children on care and protection orders nationally on 30 June 2002 was 5.9 times the non-Indigenous rate.
  - Indigenous juveniles (up to age 18) remain over-represented in criminal justice processes.


- Participation of Aboriginal children in early childhood and primary schooling has improved dramatically. Retention rates for Aboriginal children in year 12 increased from under 10% to about 38% in 2000, and the participation rates of Aboriginal children aged 15–24 in vocational education and training have reached similar levels as other Australians. However, there is still a long way to go.


**Impact of Government Policies**
- The ‘Bringing them Home’ Report (1997) suggests that Aboriginal people removed from their families are:
  - Less likely to have undertaken a post-secondary education.
Much less likely to have stable living conditions.
- Likely to be geographically mobile.
- Three times more likely to say they had no one to call on in a crisis.
- Less likely to be in a stable, confiding relationship with a partner.
- Twice as likely to report having been arrested by police and having been convicted of an offence.
- Three times as likely to report having been in jail.
- Less likely to have a strong sense of their Aboriginal cultural identity and more likely to have discovered their Aboriginality later in life.
- Twice as likely to report current use of illicit substances.
- Much more likely to report intravenous use of illicit substances.


Indigenous Australians were completely overlooked as relevant parties in the formation of the Australian Federation. Many Australians believe that a treaty is an appropriate starting point towards reconciliation.

Self determination is an ‘on-going process of choice’ to ensure that Indigenous communities are able to meet their social, cultural and economic needs. It is not about creating a separate Indigenous ‘state’.

The right to self-determination is based on the simple acknowledgment that Aboriginal people are Australia’s first people, recognised by law in the historic Mabo judgement.

The loss of this right to live according to a set of common values and beliefs, and to have that right respected by others, is at the heart of the current disadvantage experienced by Indigenous Australians.

Without self-determination it is not possible for Indigenous Australians to fully overcome the legacy of colonisation and dispossession.


Indigenous people have links to areas of land that date back thousands of years. The native title cases are about claims for ownership of property by Aboriginal people where they have maintained a physical association with their territory.

The two land-mark cases relating to native title are the Mabo case from the Mer (Murray) Islands (Torres Strait) and the Wik Case from Cape York Peninsula. To define the principle of native title the Government passed the Native Title Act 1993 and, after the Wik decision, developed a controversial 10 point plan to resolve the ambiguities in native title legislation.

Source: Aboriginal Australia & the Torres Strait Islands, A Guide to Indigenous Australia, from Facts about Aboriginal Australia & the Torres Strait Islands by Phillip Morrissey page 28-30.