

Department of Conservation and Land Management

Culturally Speaking

An Indigenous Cross Cultural Awareness exercise to

BUILD KNOWLEDGE, TRUST AND HOPE

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Introduction:

Aboriginal people have been living on this land for something more than 60,000 years. 175 years ago, Europeans arrived permanently in WA. Ever since then, there has been a troubled relationship between us. One of the greatest challenges facing our country, our organisation, and each one of us today is how we can build better relationships together.

We hope this program will achieve this.

The outcomes we are aiming for are that participants will:

- 1 **Traditional culture**
 - understand that Aboriginal people have always had an effective and sophisticated traditional culture

- 2 **History**
 - learn some key aspects of our history, as they have effected Aboriginal people.

- 3 **Impacts of history**
 - understand how that history continues to impact on us today, and how it affects our future.

- 4 **Working together effectively**
 - identify ways that we, individually and collectively, can work and live more effectively together.

We hope the course will be interesting and stimulating. We hope you will learn more, and be able to reflect on what you learn. We know that it will be challenging and sometimes uncomfortable.

It is absolutely not about guilt. But it is about responsibility. Each of us - black and white - needs to take responsibility for building a better future together. We hope that this course is one small step, for you, in playing your small but crucially important part in building that future.

1

Traditional Culture

Australia has always been a multi-cultural country. Before the arrival of Europeans there were many, many different language groups, and different cultural ways. So it is quite impossible to gain a full understanding of all the cultures that existed here. However, this section provides a glimpse of Aboriginal cultural ways before colonisation. Some of these cultural ways remain for some Aboriginal people and will be re-visited in Section 4 "Working Together". But like all cultures, Aboriginal culture has evolved and adapted to the radical changes that have occurred in the last two centuries, and it is important that we understand that this section is about traditional, not contemporary, culture.

Just as European cultures have changed and merged radically over the last 175 years, so too have Aboriginal cultures.

Aboriginal societies had a structured, sophisticated well developed culture before colonisation. Systems of kinship, social order, food and shelter provision and spiritual understanding ensured that they were connected deeply with the land that fed them, and enjoyed, at the time, some of the best nutrition and health in the world.

Kinship

Aboriginal systems of kinship are very different to western concepts. A basic principle is that each person in a language group can identify their relationship to every other member of that group - perhaps 500 people or more. (Edwards 1996).

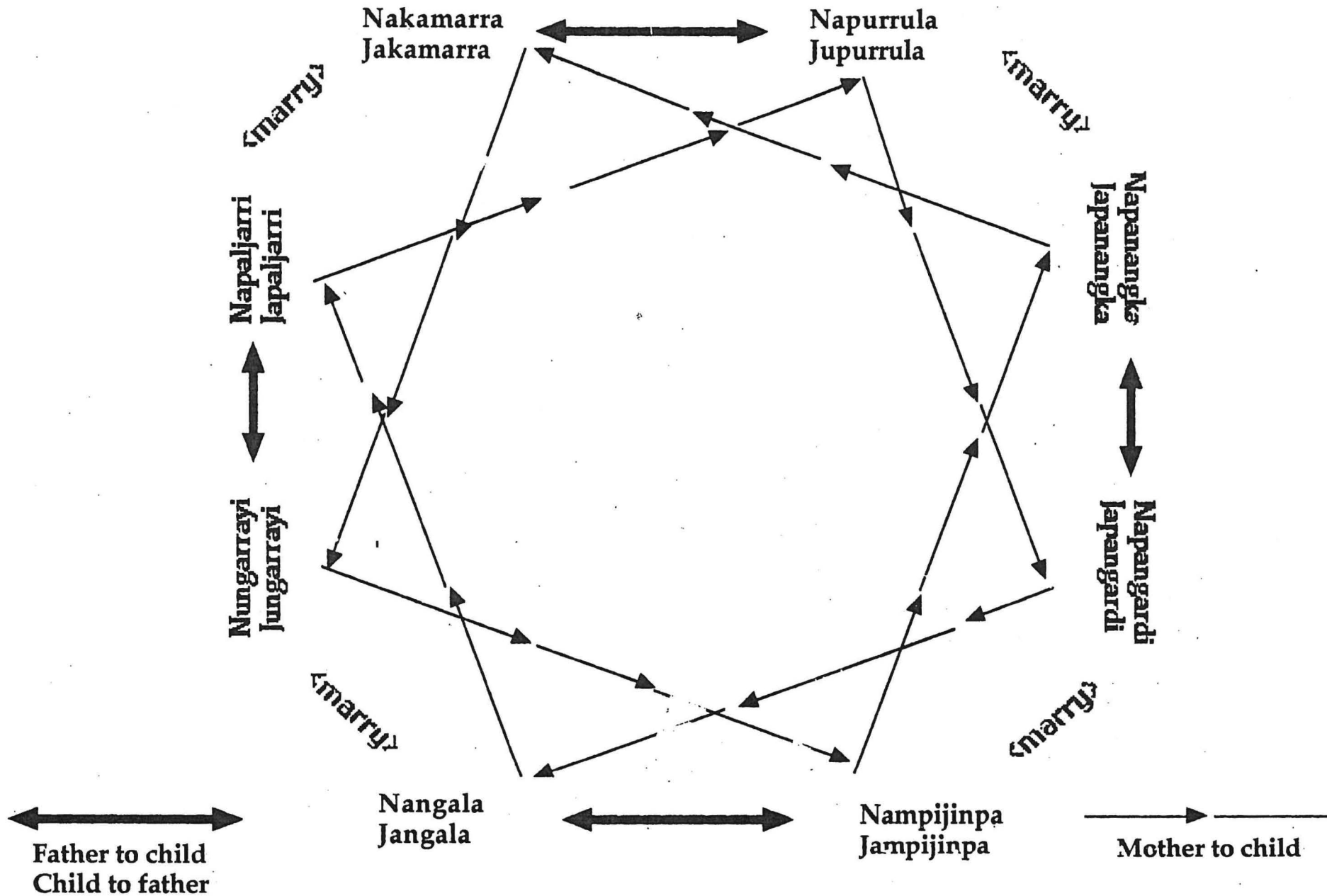
One element of this, for example, is that a male will recognise his biological father's brothers all equally as his fathers. A female will do the same with her mother's sisters.

Thus, although the biological fathers and mothers are known, great emphasis is placed on social relationships and a person has several social fathers and several social mothers.

This is just one element of kinship. The rules pertaining to traditional kinship are complex. (If you do not know a traditional person well enough to learn directly about these rules, you are unlikely to fully understand the rules, and you don't need to. You just need to be sensitive to the fact that there are different 'rules' that are of great importance in traditional areas)

The diagram on the next page illustrates how kinship systems are structured amongst one group of people.

Walpiri Skin Names



Important implications of Kinship systems

There are some very important behavioural implications of these kinship systems that can impact on the way Aboriginal people can work and live together today. Three of these are.....

Avoidance

In some areas there are strict rules about who you must not speak with directly, and who you should not be physically close to.

(This may have implications on how we run meetings in these areas)

Obligation

There is a strong sense of obligation to relations for most Aboriginal people, and in some areas some very strict rules of obligation remain. For example, if an 'uncle' has taken you through the law, you may be obliged to meet his requests from then on.

(This may have implications on people's employment in these areas)

Reciprocity

For many Aboriginal people there are strong rules of reciprocity, especially within the kinship networks. When you come to my area, I will accommodate you, knowing that when I come to your land you will return the favour.

(Obligation and Reciprocity may have implications on family responsibilities that may take priority over work responsibilities)

2

History of Colonisation

From open conflict to the 1905 Act.

When Europeans began permanent settlement in Australia there are estimates that somewhere between 300,000 and 1 million Aboriginal people already lived on this continent.

By 1900 this population had diminished to around 70,000. This devastation was caused by a combination of introduced diseases, direct conflict, and loss of land, food and water supplies that had sustained Aboriginal people for so long.

During the 1800's there was a great deal of violence against, and exploitation of, Aboriginal people. Much of this had been government approved or even sponsored.

The Pinjarra Massacre - designed to stop Aboriginal resistance to white settlement - still stands out in our local history as a traumatic event. Between 14 and 80 people were killed - out of a community of a hundred or so people. (Anyone familiar with the Port Arthur massacre will know just what sort of traumatic legacy that leaves behind.)

Other massacres and killings (generally smaller) occurred all over the State.

In Australia somewhere between 10,000 and 20,000 Aboriginal people were killed in conflicts, and around 2,000 non-Aboriginal people.

In addition to this direct conflict, exploitation was common, including a form of slavery in the pearling industry, sexual exploitation, forced removal of children, abuses of the legal system, and so on.

Attempts to 'protect' Aboriginal people, along with the dilemmas and values represented by the 'White Australia Policy' of 1901 (see next page) culminated in the 1905 Aborigine's act.

This gave the government through it's 'Chief Protector', rigid powers of protection and control over Aboriginal people include including:

- legal guardianship of all mixed-race and Aboriginal children
- access to health and educational services
- travel limitations and curfews (in doors after 6 pm)
- rights to marriage

After the dispossession (of the 1800's), injustices did not end. Racial condescension was almost universal captured, for example, in the zoological terminology favoured by the administrators: "full bloods", "half castes", "crossbreeds", "quadroons", "octoroons" and so on. In some parts of Australia, Aborigines were driven into penitentiary-style reserves, like Moore River in Western Australia. In other parts, Aborigines worked on cattle stations or in the fishing industry in return for rations but no wages. In the outback the sexual misuse of women, kidnapping of children, arbitrary arrests for cattle theft, use of neck chains to bring prisoners and witnesses to court, farcical trials and long sentences amid appalling prison conditions were all routine. Readers who doubt any of this should turn to the report of the Roth royal commission of 1904 into the condition of the natives of the north of Western Australia.

Robert Manne
The Stolen Generations and the Right

A major problem with protectionist policies was that, through enforcing dependency on government, they created a mind-set of 'welfare dependency' that continues to plague Aboriginal Communities today.

The 1905 act - what policies and practices sprang from it?

A large number of policies and practices sprang from the 1905 Act. Some of these are outlined in the 'Timeline' that is attached to this training kit.

However, we would like you to watch the video "The 1905 Act" very carefully, and note down as you hear them, some of the constraints that Aboriginal people faced as a result of this legislation and related policies and practices. List them here.....

3

Impacts of Colonisation

Understanding our past is simply essential to understanding our present and future. . We cannot address the problems we face today unless we understand what caused these problems. We cannot create our future together unless we share a common understanding of or past.

"It's time for us to take the bandage off , and see how deep the wound is, and heal the wound"
Mr Archie Barton, AM

Having learned a little about the '1905 Act', what do you think were some of the impacts of the act and related policies and practices, particularly on Aboriginal people? (Include positive or negative impacts).

Talk about this as a group, and list them here.....

The journey of well-being

It's important to understand how the past can impact on us, across generations. The experience of 'intergenerational trauma' has been enormous for Aboriginal people, and has resulted in many of the 'dysfunction' that we see amongst Aboriginal people today.

To help understand this, draw the 'journey of well being' diagram here.

2 challenges:

- How do we work together to speed the journey of healing and re-empowerment?
- How do we build trust after this history?

Our history has had a profound effect on the relationship between Aboriginal and the rest of us. We'll explore this through 'imagining ourselves into the history'. Here's a glimpse of that history as experienced by one Broome Elder.....

TELLING THE TRUTH

"You people complain that we get a few dollars welfare"

"We have seen our people massacred and raped. We have seen our children and grandchildren taken away. We have been forced from our own homes and our own land. We have been arrested for being on the streets at night, arrested for not having the right pass; arrested for no reason at all. We were not allowed to own property or housing. We were not allowed to move from one place to another; We were barred from schools and hospitals and towns because we are Aboriginal"

"And you people complain that we get a few dollars welfare".

Mr. Frank Sebastian

If this happened to you and your loved ones.....

How would you feel towards the Zortocians?. (Write as many one word answers as you can think of)

4 Working Together

4.1 Trust Building

As we've already seen, our history has created some hostility and mistrust between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. If we are going to work together effectively, we need to understand not just what has caused the mistrust, but how we can re-build it. The good news is that it is completely possible, as long as we take the task of trust-building seriously.

Each of us needs to do this individually. And we also need to work together, as a department and in our communities, to not only build trust but make our workplaces and communities places we all feel safe and respected.

How do we achieve this?

Again, we're hoping you will come up with the answers.

Back to those damn Zortocians.....

After 50 years, the Zortocians have fully succeeded in taking over our land, and our lives. Earthlings now make up around 3% of Western Australia's population. And many Zortocians feel that they should let us earthlings play more of a role. As part of this, the *West Zortocian Department of Food Harvesting* (similar to the old Dept of Ag.) has decided it wants to employ more Earthlings.

You have been asked, as a group of Earthlings, to advise the Department: *What do you need from the Zortocians (managers, policy makers, colleagues) for you to feel safe, respected in the workplace? What will enable you to trust them again?*

Write your answers (and the answers of others) here

THE PATH OF RECONCILIATION (TRUST BUILDING):

Many of the answers you have come up with may fit into the following simple framework that has guided much of the Western Australian efforts in Reconciliation.

1. **Communication** - opportunities for Indigenous and Non-Indigenous people to speak and listen in safe environments, so that truths can be heard.
2. **Awareness** of the history of dispossession and its inevitable impact on human beings
3. **Acknowledgment** of that history, because that acknowledgment assists people in moving on from it.
4. **Reparation** strategies, such as programs in health, housing, education, economic development, affirmative action, healing work, justice in native title.

The "Reparation" needs to involve 3 broad areas....

- **Justice and opportunity**, which were denied so long to Indigenous people, are essential if we are all going to achieve a "level playing field".
- **Healed spirit**, because the spirit of so many people has been wounded by the traumas and shame of dispossession, and these wounds are passed down the generations.
- **Healed relationships**, because relationships between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Australians are marked by mistrust and misunderstanding as a result of the history of dispossession. Also, relations between Indigenous people have been damaged by the on-going traumas of dispossession and displacement.

(Not everyone can play a significant role in all of the above elements, but we can all play a small part in one or more of them.

In working together, though, it is not just our history and the resultant mistrust and hostility that we need to deal with. There are also significant cultural differences. These are explored a little on the following pages.

4.2

Different Values

We often 'judge' the world by our own values, and this can be important in ensuring social cohesion. By the same token, though, if we assume that everyone understands the world through the same set of values, we can find ourselves thinking that others are inferior, stupid, lazy, inadequate or any one of dozens of other judgements.

It's important, then, to understand that different people have different values. Values are greatly influenced by our personal, family and community heritage. We can identify differences in values that have predominated in Aboriginal (as well as other cultures - particularly indigenous) and values that have predominated in cultures that came from other lands (Non-Aboriginal).

The lists below illustrates some of the observed differences, particularly as they existed early in the early 20th Century. Since then, of course, all our values have evolved. As you read through them you'll find some that seem to 'fit' your experience and others that don't. Certainly you can't assume that because someone is Aboriginal they hold all of the values in the right hand column, or vica versa. What is important to notice is that people can hold very different values. Our values are not 'right' or 'wrong'. They are values. If we are going to communicate effectively, we need to be able to honour the different values that people hold. We may not agree with them, but we need to understand and respect them.

Values concerning....	Non-Aboriginal	Aboriginal
<i>Possessions</i>	Acquisitive Accumulate	Share Use
<i>Environment</i>	Exploit/control	Adapt to
<i>Land</i>	Own Secular	Related to Sacred
<i>Time</i>	Linear Historical	Cyclic Mythical
<i>Innovation</i>	Commended	Condemned
<i>Changes</i>	Approved Desired	Disapproved Status quo
<i>Reality</i>	Material	Spiritual
<i>Orientation</i>	Future	Past
<i>Interaction</i>	Competition	Cooperation
<i>Rights and Obligations</i>	Individual Rights	Kin obligations
<i>Relationships</i>	Limited one-to-one	Extensive collective
<i>Basic Unit</i>	Individual	Group
<i>Society</i>	Diverse	Unified
<i>Status</i>	Stratified	Egalitarian

From Edwards, 1996

Remember, the 'Aboriginal values' will not automatically be held by all Aboriginal people. Two centuries of change has dramatically changed the cultural influences on all of us, and especially on Aboriginal people. *The crucial thing is to understand that different people are the product of different cultural influences. Therefore, we cannot judge or evaluate them based on a narrow view of what it is to be human.*

SOME ABORIGINAL PERSPECTIVES ON IDENTIFY

Compiled by Chontorle Pitulej 2000. Based on Dudgeon R. & Oxenham D. (1988). *The Complexity of Aboriginal Diversity: Identity and Kindredness*. Perth: Centre for Aboriginal Studies, Curtin University of Technology. (Drawn from 'Sharing the Dreaming' - by CALM's Indigenous Heritage Unit.

Issues of Identity

Many Aboriginal people experience conflicting internal values and difficulties with cultural identity, particularly when they experience the overlapping of pro-Aboriginal expectations and an imposition of values by a dominant non-Aboriginal society. Even though many Aboriginal people accept the positive aspects of their Aboriginality, internally, they often feel uncomfortable, disillusioned and even lost.

The identity crisis experienced by many Aboriginal people is a product of past issues and attitudes towards Aboriginal people that have been disrespectful and degrading. At the time of European settlement, views towards Aboriginal people were mostly negative. Miscommunication between the settlers and Aboriginal people became a barrier between different cultures. Later, this caused a breakdown in respect, understanding and knowledge of one another's purpose.

Many Aboriginal people were subject to the imposition of views and beliefs that were strongly dominated by 'white' thinking. Many Aboriginal people who live in a white dominant society are also challenged about what Aboriginality should be.

THE COCONUT COMPLEX

Being Aboriginal is not how dark you are or about whether you live in a traditional lifestyle. It is that you feel, and identify as Aboriginal. The following are examples of statements and questions that non-Aboriginals often present to Aboriginal people living in urban situations:

- But how much Aboriginal blood do you have?
- You half-breeds stir all the trouble, the real Abos are happy
- You don't speak or dress like one
- You must be in it for all the handouts
- But you're like us (whites), not like them (traditional)

The worst insult an Aboriginal can be called is a coconut -white on the inside, black on the outer. This questioning of identity has had a terrible effect on Aboriginal people and these values are often painful and complex.

Understanding this identity crisis and embracing their Aboriginality will lead Aboriginal people on the way to self-awareness and security in their dual culture.

We Aboriginal people are striving to change our thinking - to think proudly of ourselves and our culture and celebrate our 60,000 year heritage. We need to remain in touch with our culture by tracing family roots, becoming involved in social activities and interacting with Aboriginal communities.¹

¹ This last paragraph is paraphrased from the original text.

TYPES OF COMMUNITY

(Based on notes prepared by Jenny Kroonstuvier, and included in Wangkanyi Ngurra Tjurta Aboriginal Corporation Language Centre's 'Aboriginal Cultural Awareness Course')

It's worth repeating: Aboriginal people are as diverse as any other group. There will rarely be 'one Aboriginal way'. One of the many differences *between* Aboriginal people within Western Australia is the nature of the community in which they come from and/or live in today.

Wangkanyi Ngurra Tjurta Aboriginal Corporation identify four broad types of communities. Frequently, Aboriginal people will move from one community to another to visit relatives, attend ceremonies etc.

1. Traditionally-oriented Communities

Generally these are the communities which are geographically separated from towns and cities in Australia. They are the most likely to observe traditional laws and use traditional languages.

2. Rural non-traditional communities

These groups are usually less geographically separated from the rest of Australian society. Frequently they are communities set up around business enterprise, such as emu farming, or operating a pastoral lease.

3. Urban communities

These people are usually resident in towns and cities, but because of their community social organisation, they have considerable social separation. Although less likely to observe traditional customs than the first two groups, they frequently have a strong commitment to their social organisation.

4. 'Urban dispersed'

This group is usually integrated into non-indigenous Australian society.

4.3

Important cultural matters

(See also notes under section 1: Traditional Culture)

Some Cultural Issues To Be Aware Of:

- ❖ There are widespread differences in customs and culture between different Aboriginal peoples and groups.
- ❖ When working with Aboriginal people in isolated areas be aware of kinship groups. Endeavour to find out about protocols to be aware of.
- ❖ In some places, when a person dies - the persons first name is not be used at all (even when referring to others)- this is an important sign of respect.
- ❖ Avoidance of eye contact may occur - often a sign of respect, acknowledging status, age, authority or gender.
- ❖ Spiritual, law, myth, dreams or even 'astral travels' can be very important to some Aboriginal people for giving and receiving messages, which is part of guidance/warning.
- ❖ Birds and wind can bring good and bad news for some people. A tree falling for no reason could be a warning of bad news.
- ❖ Language should be respected where it is spoken. Encourage the speaker and learn some of the language yourself. This can help bring people together.
- ❖ Avoid talking about sexual organs, or telling sexual jokes around Aboriginal women.
- ❖ Funerals are often an extremely important cultural obligation and will take priority over almost anything else.
- ❖ Communities observe 'sorry time'. Aboriginal people will take time for mourning/visit families of the dead person.
- ❖ Be aware that people may be in avoidance relationships that will limit who they may talk to or sit with.
- ❖ Concepts of time can be very different (more around 'doing the right thing at the right time, rather than being where other expect me to be)
- ❖ Be aware of when Law business is on. During this time it may not be possible to enter some communities or contact Aboriginal people
- ❖ Be aware of the concept of shame - not being ashamed but embarrassment of being placed in an awkward situation.
- ❖ Always ask the community for permission to visit prior to going. This also includes Aboriginal people from other areas. This is regarded as a mark of respect.

Once again it is important to emphasise.... this list does not mean that these will be important for all Aboriginal people. *They are some issues to be aware of. But to find out what are important local issues, you will need to develop a relationship with some local people who can give you guidance. If possible, develop a 'mentor' relationship with local people, where they can mentor you in working effectively in the local area.*

Some Keys to working together

(These are some reflections from Tim Muirhead, as a non-Aboriginal person. Some of these ideas are specifically important to working with Aboriginal people. Others are just common sense about working well with people)

- ❖ Try to build a relationship of trust with at least one community member. You can then ask them how best to work with others.
 - ❖ Ask advice. Do not try to be an 'expert' on Aboriginal culture. Be interested instead. People appreciate it.
 - ❖ Be a listener more than a speaker. Ask questions rather than giving answers.
 - ❖ Take the lead from others in how you join in or run conversations.
 - ❖ Relationships are just as important as outcomes or achievements.
 - ❖ Allow people to hold their different values. This does not mean letting go of yours. It just means not imposing those values on others.
 - ❖ 'Respect for time' means different things to different people. Turning up for a meeting on time can show respect for others' time. Equally, though, leaving a meeting ('on time') when it is just getting constructive can be disrespectful of others' time.
 - ❖ Do not assume that someone will have certain values/ways of being because they are Aboriginal. (eg 'eye contact' rules are important for some and not for others. So are naming rules, kinship rules, etc). Get to know them as a human being, not as a stereotype.
 - ❖ Be aware that 'spotlighting' individuals can cause embarrassment. (eg, focussing attention on them in a group. Praise can be as much a problem as criticism in a public setting)
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4.4

Our commitment

What I will do new or differently.....

❖ in my work

❖ in my living

What we, as a Department, could do new or differently to be more effective in working with Aboriginal colleagues and/or customers.

A few places to learn more:

Books on our history

- *"Why Weren't we told?"* Henry Reynolds
(explores the national process of denial that has caused such damage)
- *"Rites of Passage"* - Quentin Beresford
(explores why so many young Aboriginal people become incarcerated)
- *"A State of Mind"* - Quentin Beresford
(explores how we could ever have thought that Stolen Generation policies were a good idea)

Books on culture

- *An Introduction to Aboriginal Society - W.H.Edwards. (1996)*
(Introduction only, but gives a good glimpse at some of the cultural roots that we should be aware of. - Out of print; some available from Amazon or from libraries)

Book on process of transformation

- *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know: White Teachers, Multiracial Schools* - Gary R. Howard
(explores the journey white people need to go through to be part of inter-cultural justice and trust building)

Many, many books of family histories by Aboriginal Authors.

eg

- *Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence* - Doris Pilkington
- *"Auntie Rita"* - Rita Huggins and Jackie Huggins

Newspapers

- *Koori Mail*

Video

- *1905 Act* (ECU University)
- *"Exile in the Kingdom"*
- *Act of Justice* (Eddie Mabo)
- *Reconciliation Australia - "It's up to us"*
- *"My hand and your hand"*

Places

The WA Museum - Aboriginal Gallery. (Recently up-dated to provide good insight into contemporary issues)

ⁱ Geoffrey Blainey, 'A short history of the World'