



UNDERSTANDING GOVERNANCE



WHAT IS GOVERNANCE AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Governance sets out how people choose to organise, how they share power, how they set their own priorities, how they get things done and how those decisions are held accountable. It requires that there are processes, structures, traditions and rules in place.

Governance gives a nation, group, community or organisation the ways and means to achieve the things that matter to them.

All societies and groups have governance. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have their own concepts of governance.

Rebuilding your governance is self-determination in action. It is also a powerful predictor of success in economic and community development.

WHAT IS EFFECTIVE AND LEGITIMATE GOVERNANCE?

Effective governance means having rules, structures and processes that are capable of achieving your objectives. Effective governance gets things done.

Governance must also be legitimate. This means your rules, structures and processes have to be seen as credible and worthy by your members. Legitimate governance gets things done properly.

The important parts of governance

Governance is made up of different but equally important elements. These all need to work well together.

Elements of governance

Your people (who does it)	Community, members, nation, families, leaders, managers, staff
Your processes (how you do it)	Rules, laws, powers, procedures, roles and responsibilities
Your strategies (what you do)	Plans, goals, milestones, programs, functions
Your resources (what you need)	Infrastructure, technology, funding, capital (cultural, social, economic), natural assets
Your culture (the way you do things)	Values, worldview, traditions, behaviour
The wider environment (outside influences)	Networks, other groups, other communities, government organisations, institutions

INDIGENOUS GOVERNANCE

“While Indigenous peoples have governed ourselves since time immemorial in accordance with our traditional laws and customs, when we speak of Indigenous governance we are not referring to the pre-colonial state. Rather, we are referring to contemporary Indigenous governance: the more recent melding of our traditional governance with the requirement to effectively respond to the wider governance environment.”
Mick Gooda, the Indigenous Social Justice Commissioner (Social Justice report 2012, p.90)

Indigenous governance is not only about the governance of organisations. It is also about how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people organise their families and communities, manage their resources, share knowledge, and get things done together, every day.

What makes governance Indigenous is the role that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and philosophical systems, cultural values, traditions, rules and beliefs play.

DIVERSE COMMUNITIES, COMPLEX ENVIRONMENTS, INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities all share particular characteristics: extensive networks and overlapping relationships, strong extended family ties, multiple ties to ‘Country’ and valued cultural identities.

But Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are also extremely diverse. They may be discrete geographic communities, dispersed communities, or communities of interest. This diversity of community requires diverse governance solutions.



Your governance context is also likely to be marked by multiple overlapping communities, a complexity of relationships, networks, and a complicated wider environment.

It is not surprising then that conflict or confusion often arises about who has the authority to make particular decisions or to 'talk for' a particular group of people.

As your community and the wider environment changes over time, your governance arrangements may also need to adapt and change.

But innovative, effective, diverse Indigenous community governance solutions for these complex conditions are being realised. Rebuilding community governance requires consulting and making decisions with the right people in your community. It also is best achieved through a positive strategy of building on community strengths, that is, identifying what assets are present in the community and harnessing these.

INDIGENOUS ORGANISATIONAL GOVERNANCE: REBUILDING CONTROL AND OWNERSHIP

Indigenous organisations play a big role. Due to limited resources, significant demands from their members and governments, and a complex governance environment, most Indigenous organisations are trying to do too much, with too little. Rebuilding organisational governance can address these challenges.

Redesigning organisational governance means looking at what you do, and how you do it. Ideas and solutions should be generated from the members, leaders and staff of the organisation itself.

Those organisations that are working to improve their governance have found that they have greater control over their own affairs and daily work, and can plan their future better.

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

TIPS

What are Indigenous organisations?

An Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation may be legally incorporated under Australian legislation. Legal incorporation requires particular governance conditions be met.

An Indigenous organisation may also be a more informal group of people who unite to get specific things done together, and who deliberately choose not to go down the road of legal incorporation—such as a committee, reference group, assembly, alliance or volunteer organisation. In informal organisations, people decide for themselves what kind of governing structure, positions and processes they want to have.