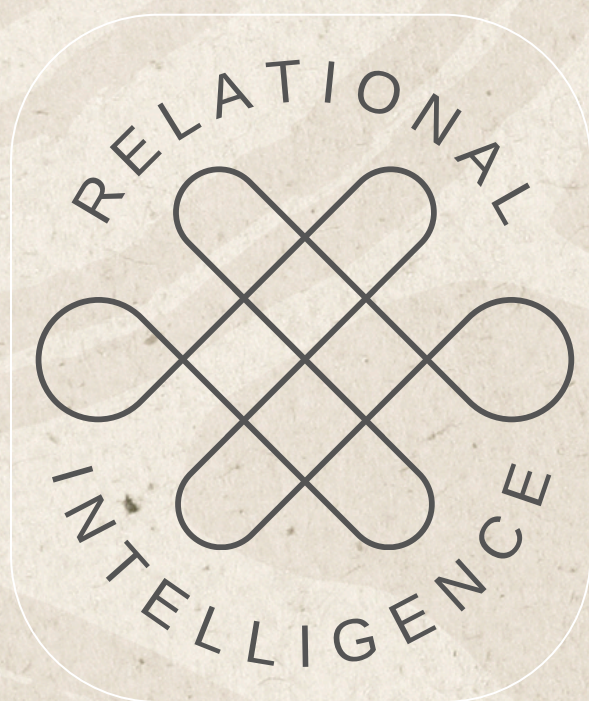


Governance Our Way

*An Introduction to
Aboriginal Governance in
Practice*



Acknowledgements

We Acknowledge the rightful Sovereign owners of the Countries that make up the continent commonly referred to as Australia, as well as the Elders, ancestors and creator spirits that have shaped life and cared for these Countries since time immemorial and who will continue to for the many years to come.

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Dr Mary Graham, Elder, academic and philosopher

Renée Brown, Institute for Urban Indigenous Health

Justin Agale, Australian Institute of Company Directors

Kaava Watson, Gargun

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Jane Jennison, Inala Wangarra

An Invitation to Learn

Governance shapes every decision an organisation makes. Yet most governance models have been developed through systems that prioritise hierarchy, ownership and control.

Aboriginal governance offers a fundamentally different way of organising people, relationships and responsibility. Developed over tens of thousands of years, it is a living governance system grounded in Country, collective responsibility and accountability.

This resource introduces Aboriginal Governance on Aboriginal Terms of Reference showing a unique and sophisticated way of doing that offers practical insights for organisations seeking more ethical, regenerative and community-centred ways of leading.

About this resource

Aboriginal governance is not just about who makes decisions. It is a way of understanding responsibility. Authority comes through relationships, cultural obligation and accountability to people and Country rather than individual power. Governance is therefore less about controlling others and more about maintaining balance between community, Country, knowledge and future generations.

Aboriginal Terms of Reference can be understood as human ordering, a long-term practice in making sense of existence, relationships, and thus responsibility. As one Elder described it, this is not about going back 500 years. It is about restating and repeating the high principles that have always been there: that land is the source of the law, that we look after Country, and that we look after kin. These are not relics. They are living tools.

Aboriginal Governance is not something you learn by reading alone. As practitioners shared, *“It’s a doing thing. You have to keep turning up and keep practising it because it is a collective thing.”* This resource is a starting point to support your learning. The real work happens through relationships, community, and ongoing practice grounded in accountability, reciprocity, and respect for Country.

A Different Starting Point

Governance did not begin with organisations, constitutions or corporate structures. For Aboriginal peoples, governance begins with Country. Country is more than place; it is the source of law, identity, belonging and responsibility. From this first relationship flow our obligations to family, kin, community and future generations. Governance is therefore not simply a system for making decisions or exercising authority. It is the ongoing practice of maintaining relationships, fulfilling responsibilities and caring for the interconnected wellbeing of people and Country. From this perspective, authority is not owned or accumulated, it is entrusted through relationships and sustained through accountability

"It's a doing thing. You have to keep turning up and keep practising it because it is a collective activity."

Insight from the Aboriginal Governance and Enterprise Roundtable

Governance Through Relationships

Conventional governance

- Power is accumulated
- Competition
- Individual leadership
- Accountability upward
- Organisation first

Aboriginal governance

- Authority is entrusted
- Responsibility
- Collective leadership
- Accountability outward
- Country and community first

**The distinction is the purpose of governance.
One concentrates authority while other distributes responsibility.**

Governance Through Relationships

Because authority is relational, governance naturally operates as a network rather than a hierarchy. The circle represents shared access to voice, knowledge, responsibility and influence. Leadership qualities remain important, existing in service to the collective rather than above or in control of it.



“Aboriginal governance does have a hierarchy, but it’s a soft hierarchy.”

Insight from the Aboriginal Governance and Enterprise Roundtable

Rather than power being concentrated at the top and protected through competition, authority in Aboriginal governance comes from the people and flows back to the people. Decision makers deliberate with Elders, senior knowledge holders, and community members. Authority is checked - not by a board resolution, but by the ongoing obligation to the people it serves. If that obligation is not met, the people will find ways to withdraw that authority. The key distinction: in a hard hierarchy, you gain power and hold it. In a soft hierarchy, you are trusted with power on behalf of others, and you carry it carefully.

The Foundations of Aboriginal Governance

“We use the term Country to talk about all things belonging to place. It is the flunctuating balance of relationships that maintain Country, the trees, plants, animals, rocks, water, air, fire, and us. But also it is story, spirit, science, and relationship.”

Insight from the Aboriginal Governance and Enterprise Roundtable

Aboriginal governance begins with relationship to Country. Country is also the source of law, identity, responsibility and belonging. From this first relationship flow our responsibilities to family, community and future generations.

“The land grows us up.”

Dr Mary Graham

This single phrase captures the essence of Aboriginal Governance: the relationship with Country teaches us how to be in relationship with eachother.

Aboriginal Governance and Impact Business

What changes when governance changes?

If governance is built on responsibility rather than extraction: Business changes. Success changes. Leadership is shared. And most importantly, impact changes.

Grounding leadership in collective responsibility, relationships, and accountability to community, Country, and future generations means drawing on shared knowledge and lived experience, helps organisations stay connected to community priorities and achieve more inclusive, sustainable, and purpose-driven outcomes.

An Elder shared the story of an Aboriginal community that regained its land and began running a pastoral enterprise.

While others predicted they would fail, the community said, *“We’re looking after the land. The profits will come after.”*

Years later, regenerative grazing is celebrated as an innovative pastoral approach, even though Aboriginal communities had long practised these principles through their responsibility to care for Country.

Insight from the Aboriginal Governance and Enterprise Roundtable

Social enterprise asks how business can create public value.

Aboriginal governance asks a deeper question:

What responsibilities must businesses fulfil before value can be created?

Building Better Outcomes Through Aboriginal Governance

Foundations:

- Country
- Law
- Relationality
- Reciprocity
- Custodianship
- Collective Wellbeing

These create:

- Trust
- Accountability
- Shared authority
- Consensus
- Stewardship

Which lead to:

- Better decisions
- Stronger communities
- Sustainable enterprise
- Long-term impact

Outcomes in Practice

“Consensus-building in Aboriginal governance does not mean everyone must agree. It means everyone must be heard, and that the process of coming together is itself an act of governance. The goal is not unanimity, it is alignment through relationship.”

Insight from the Aboriginal Governance and Enterprise Roundtable

What does Aboriginal governance make possible?

- Organisations remain accountable to community rather than individuals.
- Decisions consider future generations alongside present needs.
- Leadership qualities are strengthened through relationships rather than hierarchy.
- Relationships become sustainable for long term success.
- Success is measured by the wellbeing of people and Country.

Looking ahead

Ultimately, Aboriginal Governance ensures lasting outcomes are built through relationships, responsibility, and accountability rather than structure alone. Throughout this project, participants reflected on how mainstream systems often celebrate individual Aboriginal success while making collective community success harder to achieve. Aboriginal Governance offers a different measure of success, grounded in obligations to people, Country, and future generations.

For social enterprises and purpose-driven organisations, this raises an important question: are partnerships with Indigenous peoples and communities reciprocal, built on shared understanding, trust, and responsibility, or are they transactional, shaped by external priorities and timelines? Aboriginal Governance reminds us that impact is relational. It grows through respect, reciprocity, and long-term commitment, ensuring that success is measured not only by outcomes, but by how well people, place, and future generations are cared for.

Thank you

For more information email us at info@relationalintel.com.au or visit our
website: relationalintel.com.au

