



# DARK LIGHTNING

## **RAP Alignment: Opportunities, Learnings & Insights for First Nations Social Enterprise Social Enterprise Development Initiative (SEDI) First Nations Peer Learning & Support Learning Community**

**Convened by Dark Lightning**

**Binowee Bayles | Tim Moriarty | Shannon Valentine**

### **Introduction**

This report shares insights emerging from the RAP Alignment Learning Community, commissioned by Social Enterprise Australia as part of the Social Enterprise Development Initiative (SEDI).

The learning community was established to create a space for First Nations leaders, practitioners, social enterprises and changemakers to explore how Reconciliation Action Plans (RAPs) can move beyond compliance and contribute to meaningful, community-led economic development.

The original intention was to convene a series of peer learning workshops. However, throughout the project it became clear that a more flexible and culturally responsive approach was required. Periods of Sorry Business, competing community obligations, work commitments and the realities of operating within First Nations networks meant that many participants were more comfortable engaging through one-on-one conversations, smaller discussions and ongoing relationship-based exchanges.

Rather than viewing this as a limitation, the project embraced a consultative approach grounded in trust, reciprocity and deep listening. These conversations provided rich insights into the opportunities, challenges and tensions surrounding RAP implementation, procurement, social enterprise development and First Nations participation within the broader social enterprise ecosystem.

At its heart, this project became less about delivering workshops and more about creating trusted spaces for conversation, reflection and connection.

### **Purpose**

This learning community was designed to help First Nations leaders and practitioners feel more confident and capable when navigating RAPs and the world of social enterprise.

The intention was to create a space where participants could:

- Share experiences and learn from one another.
- Build confidence in engaging with RAP-aligned organisations.
- Better understand opportunities within procurement and social enterprise ecosystems.
- Explore ways to influence how RAPs are developed and implemented.
- Strengthen relationships across First Nations enterprise networks.
- Contribute to practical resources that can support both Indigenous and non-Indigenous organisations.

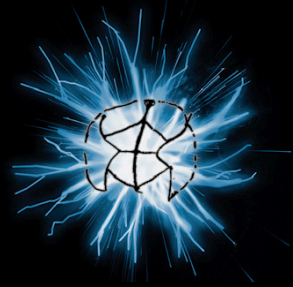
More than anything, the project sought to build connection. Participants consistently spoke about the value of having a trusted network where they could test ideas, ask questions, challenge assumptions and support one another through shared experience.

### **Participants & Engagement**

The learning community engaged First Nations practitioners, social enterprise leaders, artists, consultants, community advocates and business owners from across Australia.

Conversations included representatives from established Aboriginal enterprises, emerging businesses, community organisations, cultural practitioners and individuals working within RAP-aligned institutions.

While some participants have chosen to be publicly acknowledged, others requested that their contributions remain confidential.



This report reflects collective themes and insights rather than attributing individual perspectives.

Engagement occurred through:

- Individual consultations
- Small group discussions
- Informal peer conversations
- Relationship-based knowledge sharing
- Ongoing reflection between convenors and participants

This approach generated a depth of insight that may not have emerged through more formal workshop settings.

## **Key Themes Emerging from Conversations**

### **Theme 1: RAPs Must Move Beyond Compliance**

A consistent theme throughout the conversations was that many RAPs continue to be experienced as compliance exercises rather than vehicles for meaningful change.

Participants acknowledged that RAPs have created important opportunities and increased visibility for First Nations businesses and communities. However, there was also frustration that many organisations remain focused on completing actions rather than building genuine relationships.

Participants spoke about the difference between "doing RAP activities" and embedding reconciliation as an ongoing way of working.

Many felt that meaningful reconciliation requires long-term commitment, accountability and relationship-building rather than isolated events, procurement targets or annual reporting requirements.

### **Theme 2: Procurement Is Still Difficult to Navigate**

Procurement emerged as one of the most significant areas of opportunity and challenge.

While RAP commitments have increased demand for First Nations suppliers, participants described procurement processes as inconsistent, difficult to navigate and often focused on short-term outcomes.

A recurring concern was that many procurement relationships remain transactional rather than developmental.

Participants expressed a desire to see:

- Earlier engagement with First Nations businesses.
- Longer-term partnerships.
- Greater investment in capability development.
- More transparent procurement pathways.
- Stronger accountability for outcomes beyond spend targets.

The conversation highlighted a need to shift from procurement as a compliance mechanism towards procurement as a tool for community and enterprise development.

### **Theme 3: Confidence Matters**

One of the strongest themes to emerge was confidence.

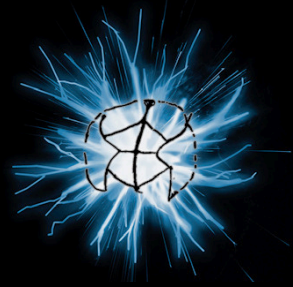
Participants frequently spoke about uncertainty when entering conversations with larger organisations, government agencies or institutional partners.

Many described challenges associated with:

- Understanding RAP processes.
- Valuing their expertise.
- Setting appropriate fees.
- Navigating procurement systems.
- Advocating for their communities and businesses.

Participants noted that peer learning and relationship-building play an important role in building confidence and reducing isolation.

A clear finding from this project is that creating opportunities for First Nations practitioners to learn from one another can be just as valuable as providing technical training or resources.



## RAP Alignment Pathway

### A Practical Framework for Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Social Enterprises

One of the strongest themes emerging from this learning community was the need for a clearer pathway for organisations seeking to engage meaningfully with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses, practitioners and communities.

Participants consistently highlighted that many organisations approach reconciliation through isolated activities, procurement targets or compliance requirements, rather than through genuine relationships and shared responsibility. The RAP Alignment Pathway has been developed as a practical guide for organisations, regardless of whether they have a RAP, to better align their actions with meaningful reconciliation outcomes and First Nations-led economic development.

#### Step 1: Commit

Move beyond compliance and clarify your intent.

Before engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities or businesses, organisations should ask:

- Why are we doing this?
- What outcomes are we seeking?
- Who benefits?
- How does this align with our values and operations?

Participants noted that many organisations begin with a RAP action rather than a genuine commitment to relationship-building.

True alignment begins with organisational readiness, self-reflection and accountability.

Key Question:

Are we seeking a transaction, or are we seeking a relationship?

#### Step 2: Listen

Relationships come before projects.

Participants repeatedly emphasised that trust cannot be fast-tracked.

Meaningful engagement requires:

- Listening before proposing solutions.
- Understanding local context.
- Respecting cultural authority.
- Making space for different perspectives.

For many participants, some of the most successful partnerships began with conversations that had no immediate commercial outcome.

Key Question:

Have we taken the time to understand community priorities before proposing our own?

#### Step 3: Partner

Engage early and share decision-making.

A common frustration raised throughout the learning community was being brought into projects too late, after decisions had already been made.

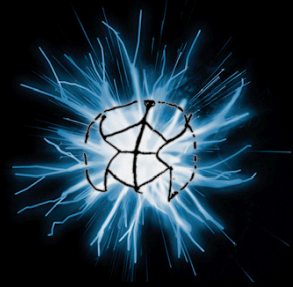
Meaningful partnerships involve:

- Early engagement.
- Shared planning.
- Clear expectations.
- Respect for cultural knowledge and expertise.
- Transparent communication.

Participants spoke strongly about the difference between consultation and collaboration.

Key Question:

Are First Nations voices helping shape decisions, or simply responding to them?



#### **Step 4: Invest**

Support capability, growth and long-term opportunity.

Participants highlighted that procurement can often be transactional and short-term.

While spend targets are important, meaningful economic participation requires broader investment in:

- Business capability.
- Skills development.
- Mentoring.
- Longer-term contracts.
- Strategic partnerships.

Investment should be viewed as building stronger enterprises and communities rather than simply meeting procurement obligations.

Key Question:

What are we contributing beyond a single contract or project?

#### **Step 5: Share Power**

Create space for challenge, accountability and leadership.

One of the strongest messages from participants was that genuine reconciliation requires organisations to be open to challenge.

This means:

- Listening to difficult feedback.
- Sharing decision-making authority.
- Recognising cultural expertise.
- Being prepared to change established ways of working.

Participants consistently spoke about the value of working with organisations that were willing to share power rather than simply seek endorsement.

Key Question:

Who currently holds power, and how are we creating opportunities to share it?

#### **Step 6: Measure What Matters**

Focus on outcomes, not activities.

Participants questioned whether many RAPs are measuring what is truly important.

Rather than focusing solely on:

- Number of meetings.
- Procurement spend.
- Attendance figures.

Organisations should also consider:

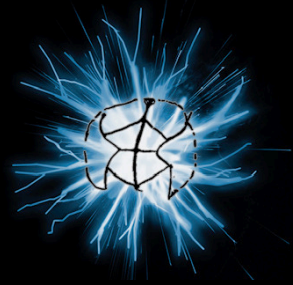
- Strength of relationships.
- Community benefit.
- Enterprise growth.
- Cultural safety.
- Long-term trust.

The most successful examples shared through this learning community focused on enduring relationships and mutual benefit rather than one-off achievements.

Key Question:

What has genuinely changed as a result of this work?

What Success Looks Like



Through these conversations, participants described success as:

- Strong and respectful relationships.
- First Nations businesses thriving and growing.
- Cultural knowledge being respected and appropriately valued.
- Procurement creating long-term opportunities rather than short-term transactions.
- Organisations being willing to learn, adapt and be accountable.
- Communities having greater influence over decisions that affect them.

Ultimately, RAP alignment is not about completing a checklist.

It is about creating the conditions for genuine partnership, shared responsibility and community-led outcomes.

### **Calls to Action for the Social Enterprise Sector**

Based on the conversations held throughout this learning community, participants identified several priorities for the sector:

1. Move beyond compliance-driven approaches to reconciliation.
2. Prioritise relationship-building before procurement.
3. Develop clearer pathways for First Nations enterprises to access opportunities.
4. Create greater transparency around pricing and remuneration for cultural expertise.
5. Support peer learning and mentoring opportunities for First Nations practitioners.
6. Increase First Nations leadership in decision-making and governance.
7. Measure success through long-term impact rather than short-term activity.

The future of RAP alignment will not be determined by the number of actions completed, but by the quality of relationships built and the opportunities created for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, businesses and communities.

This learning community was commissioned by Social Enterprise Australia as part of the Australian Government's Social Enterprise Development Initiative (SEDI) to help build social enterprise sector capability and grow social impact.