



Growing With Integrity

Reflections for the First Nations Creative and Cultural Sector

Introduction

This resource has been developed through conversations with First Nations creatives, cultural organisations, publishers, arts workers, social enterprises and community-led organisations exploring growth, sustainability, partnerships and impact within the creative and cultural industries.

Across the discussions, participants reflected on the unique role First Nations creative and cultural organisations play within community — not only as businesses or employers, but as custodians of story, culture, language, knowledge and identity. Many described balancing creative practice, cultural responsibility, community accountability and financial sustainability simultaneously.

This is not intended to be a definitive guide or framework. Every First Nations creative and cultural organisation, enterprise and practice operates within different cultural, community and economic contexts. Instead, this resource captures broad themes and practical considerations that emerged through conversation.

Creative Growth, Visibility and Sustainability

Participants spoke about growth not simply as expanding commercially, but as creating stronger outcomes for community, culture and future generations. For many, growth was connected to:

- increasing opportunities for community
- strengthening cultural visibility
- supporting creative and cultural career pathways
- building financial sustainability
- creating long-term impact through storytelling, creativity and community leadership

Several participants reflected on the importance of taking a long-term and relational approach to growth, rather than pursuing rapid expansion at the expense of governance, relationships or

wellbeing. There was also discussion about visibility and representation, particularly within arts, cultural and creative industries. Participants reflected on wanting First Nations creatives, cultural organisations and enterprises to be more visible in major public spaces, government settings and mainstream conversations, while still maintaining control over how culture and stories are represented.

At the same time, many acknowledged the pressures that come with increased visibility:

- pressure to scale quickly
- being asked to participate in creative projects, collaborations or programs outside organisational scope or capacity
- limited senior staffing capacity
- expectations to constantly educate or advocate
- growing competition within the sector

Reflection Prompts

- What does sustainable growth look like for our organisation?
- What are we trying to protect as we grow?
- Are opportunities aligned with our values and community priorities?
- What kind of visibility are we seeking, and why?

Partnerships, Funding and Cultural Authority

Partnerships emerged as one of the strongest themes across all sessions. Participants consistently described strong partnerships as:

- long-term
- values-aligned
- transparent
- relational rather than transactional
- grounded in trust and reciprocity

Many reflected on the importance of open conversations around capacity, expectations and resourcing. Several participants spoke about experiences where partnerships remained strong

because both parties prioritised honesty, flexibility and long-term relationships over short-term outcomes.

At the same time, discussions also highlighted challenges within partnership and funding environments, including:

- underquoting or under-pricing creative, cultural and community expertise
- funding delays creating operational uncertainty
- shifting priorities within partner organisations
- extractive or performative engagement approaches
- complex reporting obligations across multiple funding streams
- pressure to align work to existing institutional frameworks that may not reflect community realities

Creative practitioners also raised concerns around ownership and use of cultural and creative material, and the need for stronger recognition of cultural and intellectual property. Participants also reflected on the expectation that First Nations creatives and organisations will continually provide cultural guidance, education and representation work alongside their core creative practice — often without adequate resourcing or recognition.

Some participants reflected on how difficult it can be to navigate unwritten expectations and changing “goal posts” when working with larger institutions or government systems.

Practical considerations

- Strong partnerships require clarity, trust and shared expectations.
- Cultural and creative labour should be appropriately valued and resourced.
- Long-term relationships often matter more than short-term project outcomes. Funding structures, commissioning timelines and institutional processes can significantly impact sustainability, creative planning and long-term organisational stability.

Reflection Prompts

- Is this partnership reciprocal and values-aligned?
- Are expectations and decision-making processes clear?
- Are we being properly resourced for the work being requested?
- What boundaries do we need to strengthen?

Measuring Impact in Meaningful Ways

Many participants reflected on the challenge of measuring impact in ways that genuinely reflect community, cultural and creative outcomes. While some organisations had established reporting systems, others spoke about the difficulty of balancing extensive reporting obligations with limited time, staffing and resources. Participants noted that many funding and reporting frameworks prioritise quantitative outputs, while the outcomes most valued by community are often relational, long-term or difficult to measure through standard metrics.

Across the conversations, creative and cultural impact was described in many ways, including:

- strengthening cultural identity and storytelling
- creating pathways into employment and creative careers
- supporting young people and community wellbeing
- amplifying First Nations voices
- building confidence, financial capability and independence
- creating opportunities for cultural exchange and knowledge sharing
- supporting language, storytelling and cultural continuation
- increasing visibility of First Nations creative voices and perspectives
- strengthening representation within the arts and cultural sector

Participants reflected on the importance of storytelling and anecdotal evidence alongside data collection. Several organisations described using stories, reflections and community feedback to better understand impact where formal measurement frameworks were limited or inappropriate. Participants also recognised that First Nations creative and cultural practice often delivers multiple outcomes simultaneously — cultural, social, educational, relational and economic — while many funding and reporting frameworks do not fully capture this complexity.

Reflection Prompts

- What outcomes matter most to our community?
- Are we measuring what funders value, or what community values?
- What stories or impacts are missing from our reporting?
- How can impact measurement support the work rather than overwhelm it?

Final Reflections

Across all sessions, participants reinforced that First Nations creative and cultural organisations are not simply arts businesses or service providers. They are often vehicles for cultural continuity, storytelling, representation, community strength, creative expression, economic independence and intergenerational knowledge sharing.

There was no single definition of success. Some participants focused on employment and pathways for community, while others prioritised creative practice, cultural preservation, advocacy or long-term sustainability. What remained consistent was the importance of remaining grounded in values, relationships and community accountability.

The conversations also highlighted the need for greater understanding across government, funding and institutional environments about the realities of First Nations creative enterprise — particularly the cultural, relational and community responsibilities that often sit alongside business operations.

Questions to carry forward

- What does success mean for us?
- What are we unwilling to compromise?
- How do we protect culture while creating opportunity?
- How do we ensure sustainability for both people and organisations?
- What legacy are we building for future generations?

The conversations reinforced that creative and cultural practice is not separate from community, identity or responsibility to culture — it is deeply connected to all three.

This resource reflects broad themes and shared reflections emerging from group conversations and learning sessions. Examples and insights have been intentionally de-identified and generalised to protect confidentiality and ensure no individual participant, organisation or discussion can be directly identified.