

**TOP TIPS for CEOs of Aboriginal organisations**  
**(from the FDIO Panel Discussion held in Perth on 11 April 2018)**  
**Panelists: Jahna Cedar, Wayne Nannup and Greg Ryan-Gadsden**  
**Facilitator: Amanda Wheeler**

- **Cultural governance** (including cultural protocols, lore practices, avoidance obligations, skin groups, values, beliefs) **is just as important as corporate governance** for community members of an Aboriginal organisation. An effective CEO will always find a way whenever possible to meet the obligations of both when making a decision.
- **A CEO of an Indigenous organisation needs to recognise that there are two types of authority.** Community authority is with the Elders - holders of knowledge, keepers of land. Board authority delivers a different set of obligations and both need to be respected.
- **Being the CEO of an Aboriginal organisation is to serve the local community.**
- **A Representative board**, with different family groups or language groups represented, not skilled-based board can set up a board to fail unless a robust induction process is used to introduce fiduciary duties and legal obligations of being a board director.
- **Traditional Owner CEOs are highly scrutinised and kept accountable and honest.** Every decision they make as CEO will directly affect their own family members and their own community. There are many competing interests and the community expects the Traditional Owner CEO to find a solution that satisfies everyone. Perceived conflict of interest even if not acted on.
- As an impartial outsider, a non-Indigenous CEO will often find they act as a facilitator and Independent advisor around process and decision-making.
- **When first appointed as a non-Indigenous CEO**, the most important task is to listen to the community and hear the stories of the land. Find a cultural champion and Elder who will share their knowledge and support your cultural learning.
- **Each Aboriginal group is different** and non-Indigenous CEOs have to learn new interactions and protocols for each group.
- **Decision-making sits with the community and with the board, with key input from Elders.** A CEO should expect to consult widely on any important decision, particularly with the Elders of a community and defer to the Elders on any issue of cultural significance.
- However, gaining access to directors, Elders and community members in order to adequately consult can be difficult to achieve due to great distances to reach where people live and lack of adequate communication options.
- **It is important for a CEO of an Indigenous organisation to keep their eye on the big picture**, long term vision, long term gain and outcomes of the community as a whole rather than individual desires. Need to balance immediate needs with long term journey of a community.
- **An effective CEO needs to focus on building relationships and keeping community members included** and focused on the community long term goals.