

TOP TIPS for Independent Directors on Traditional Owner Boards
(from the FDIO Panel Discussion held in Perth on 29 August 2017)
Panelists: Kimberley Slattery, Patrick Jacobs, Amanda Wheeler and Mar Knox

- **Being on a Traditional Owner board is to serve the local community.** Independent Directors are appointed to support and mentor the Traditional Owner Directors whose first priority is to act in the best interests of their local community.
- **Be conscious of the heavy responsibility held by the Traditional Owner Directors who live in the community they serve.** Every decision they make on the Traditional Owner board will directly affect their own family members. There are many competing interests and the community expects the Traditional Owner Directors to find a solution that satisfies everyone. A sometimes impossible task. It is a tough and isolating role for Traditional Owner Directors who will cop all the blame and responsibility for board decisions.
- **Making important decisions on a Traditional Owner board can take a long time.** A board meeting is a time to raise and mull over every aspect of an issue and consider all best and worst case scenarios. Big issues will need to be taken back to family members in the community for further discussion before a final decision can be made. Don't expect to make quick decisions.
- **Silence does not mean consensus.** If Traditional Owner Directors are not debating an important issue, it means they are not ready to discuss it and the decision should be deferred until they are ready to address it. Any decision made without robust and lengthy discussion will just have to be revisited at a later date, anyway.
- **Be prepared to invest considerable time and energy into getting to know the people of the community, their culture, their stories and their land.** Every Aboriginal community is different and every group's story and culture is different. It will build trust, strengthen relationships and this investment will ultimately reward you many times over.
- **Be aware of and respect local cultural sensitivities.** Family relationships have a strong influence on decision-making and Independent Directors will need to identify and interpret cultural situations at Board meetings and within the community. Cultural obligations may require men's and women's business to be discussed separately. A Traditional Owner Director may not be culturally permitted to sit near or speak to someone else on the board. Modern board protocol sometimes has to be adapted to the cultural circumstances.
- **Patience and your ability to listen will be your greatest assets.** Before offering any advice, listen to what the Traditional Owner Directors and the people of the community are telling you that they need.
- **It's never just about money.** Making money is just a means to the ultimate end of providing for and protecting the community and its culture. Cultural obligations and community priorities need to be considered along side of financial benefits.
- **The opinion of the Elders of the community will carry equal weight to Traditional Owner Directors.** Be prepared for the board to consult them on many issues of importance.
- **You will need to respect cultural lore obligations and corporate law obligations.** Sitting on a Traditional Owner board means respecting and integrating community cultural obligations together with corporate board obligations.