

Honouring the leadership, wisdom
& future of First Nations women

FIRST NATIONS UNLIMITED

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP SUMMIT

Post Event Wrap

20-21 May 2026 | Meanjin, Brisbane & Online

PRESENTED BY

**THE
HATCHERY**



IN PARTNERSHIP WITH

natsiwa

NATIONAL ABORIGINAL AND
TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER WOMEN'S ALLIANCE



KEY THEMES

LEADERSHIP IS RELATIONAL, NOT INDIVIDUAL

The most enduring leadership is built in relationship with community, culture and family. Its strength is measured not by personal achievement but by how many it carries forward and whose futures it makes possible.

IDENTITY IS A SOURCE OF AUTHORITY

Roots, rituals and lived experience are not vulnerabilities to manage but the deepest source of credibility a leader holds. Those who lead from that place carry an authenticity no credential or title can manufacture.

SYSTEMS CHANGE FROM THE INSIDE

Representation inside broken institutions is not compromise but strategy. When those most affected by harmful structures join them, they carry real power to reshape what those systems fund, value and make possible.

RESPONSIBILITY ARRIVES BEFORE A TITLE DOES

For many leaders, especially those from underrepresented communities, the weight of responsibility is carried long before any formal authority is granted. That carried weight is not a burden to shed but the source of purpose.

STRUCTURES OVER SILOS

The deepest advocacy refuses to let systems divide people into separate policy categories. Representing the whole person, not a siloed issue, is what gives community leadership the power to change structures rather than simply navigate them.

DAY ONE | Wednesday 20th May 2026

Ministerial address

Hon Malarndirri McCarthy (She/Her)

Yanguwa woman, Minister for Indigenous Australians, Parliament of Australia

- **Leadership is built through community, not alone:** The most enduring leadership is never an individual pursuit. It is shaped in relationship with family, culture and community, and its strength is measured not by personal achievement but by how many it carries forward.
- **Quiet leadership reshapes the spaces it walks through:** First Nations women often lead through responsibility rather than recognition, navigating paths not built for them. That act of walking forward while making room for others is itself a profound form of structural change.

What First Nations women bring to Australia’s future

Professor Marcia Langton AO

FASSA, AFTSE, Yiman & Bidjara woman, Associate Provost & Foundation Chair of Australian Indigenous Studies, The University of Melbourne

- **History shapes communities in unseen ways:** Understanding why people organise their lives as they do requires knowing the systems that shaped them. Policies, not personal failings, create patterns across generations. Leaders who lack this context will misread the communities they seek to serve.
- **Honest storytelling builds real connection:** A Welcome to Country that names true history, shared ancestry and lived connection does more than ceremony. It reminds leaders that genuine inclusion begins with truth, not ritual, and that shared story is the foundation of shared purpose.

Leading while holding community expectations

Helen Ockerby (She/Her)

Bardi & Noongar woman, Executive Officer, Shooting Stars - Glass Jar Australia

Ann-Maree Long (She/Her)

Badjala, Woppaburra & Torres Strait Islander woman, Head of Community Engagement, EPIC Pathways

Alisi Tutuila (She/Her)

Wormi woman, Chairperson, Aboriginal Housing Company

Katja (Kat) Henaway (She/Her)

Mer & Mua woman, Founder, Blax Capital & Politics in Colour

- **Community expectations shift with every hat worn:** Leaders who hold multiple community roles carry multiple, sometimes competing expectations. Navigating this is not a burden to manage but a skill to develop, knowing which community you are accountable to in each moment is itself a form of leadership.
- **Becoming the solution redefines the wait:** When systems are slow to move, leaders who step forward to create what is missing do not abandon advocacy, they embody it. Impatience with the status quo, channelled into action, is one of the most powerful forms of community leadership.

Strength, softness & authority can co-exist in building your brand

Dr Michelle Deshong (She/Her)

Kuku Yalanji woman, Founder, Deshong Consulting

- **Identity shapes the lens of leadership:** The communities and conversations leaders grow up inside become the foundation of their purpose. Those who understand where their convictions were forged lead with greater clarity, consistency and depth than those who have never traced that source.
- **Witnessing history is its own education:** Proximity to movements, even as a child beneath the table, plants the seeds of lifelong conviction. Leaders who can identify the moment their cause found them carry an authenticity that no credential or title can manufacture.

Truth-telling in the age of algorithms

Lucy Davis (She/Her)

Founder, Mob23

- **Authenticity cuts through the noise:** Organic truth-telling, without corporate backing or paid reach, can command greater trust and attention than polished campaigns. Audiences respond to unfiltered voices because sincerity is the algorithm no platform can manufacture or buy.
- **Cultural identity is not a vulnerability:** What makes a leader feel exposed in public, their roots, their rituals, their community, is often their greatest source of authority. Leaning into that identity rather than softening it is what makes a message land and endure.

First Nations women leading beyond traditional pathways

Penney Ferguson (She/Her)

Chief Executive Officer, First Nations Women's Legal Service Queensland

Lisa Sarago (She/Her)

Bundaburra Yidinji/Western Yalanji woman, Chief Executive Officer & Founder, Digital Trackers

- **Non-traditional paths reveal unexpected purpose:** Leadership often emerges not from a planned route but from following what resonates. Entering unfamiliar industries or sectors can unlock a deeper alignment between skills and impact than any conventional pathway would have offered.
- **Education is a form of inherited courage:** When the generation before you was denied opportunity, pursuing education and leadership is not personal ambition, it is a continuation of their unfinished story and a commitment to what they fought to give you.

Leading with responsibility not just authority

Jana Stewart (She/Her)

Mutthi Mutthi & Wamba Wamba woman, Labour Senator for Victoria, Parliament of Australia

- **Authority is given, responsibility is carried:** For many leaders, especially those from underrepresented communities, responsibility arrives long before any title does. The weight of that carried responsibility is not a burden to shed but a source of fuel that gives leadership its deepest purpose.
- **Representation shapes the integrity of power:** When decision-making spaces reflect only those who have historically held power, they quietly signal who belongs and who doesn't. Genuine representation is not symbolic gesture, it is a structural condition for democracy and organisations to function with integrity.

First Nations women who change systems, not just succeed within them

Wendy Anders (She/Her)

Arrente woman, Chief Executive Officer, The National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Women's Alliance (NATSIWA)

Jacqueline Elwell (She/Her)

East Arrente woman, NATSIWA Member

Ella Raciti (She/Her)

Social Media Advisor, Queensland Government

Moderated by Sarah Corrigan (She/Her)

Chair, The National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Women's Alliance (NATSIWA)

- **Holistic advocacy resists fragmentation:** When systems divide communities into separate issues, health, education, finance, the deepest advocacy refuses that fragmentation. Representing the whole person, not a policy category, is what gives grassroots leadership its power to change structures rather than simply navigate them.
- **Leadership is a journey, not a title:** Moving from community health worker to institutional head to peak body CEO is not a straight line. The most transformative leaders return to their roots by choice, because proximity to community is not a step back, it is the source of real change.

What I wish I knew earlier

Lil Gordon (She/Her)

Ngemba woman, First Assistant Secretary - First Nations Partnerships, Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications, Sport & the Arts

- **Ancestry shapes the leaders we become:** The values, sacrifices and stories carried from those who came before are not sentimental weight, they are a leader's deepest source of direction, resilience and purpose.
- **Leadership is not a destination you plan for:** The most meaningful roles often arrive not through ambition but through integrity. Leaders who stay grounded in purpose find the path finds them rather than the other way around.

“SO GRATEFUL TO LISTEN TO, LEARN FROM AND STAND ALONGSIDE SO MANY DEADLY WOMEN. ALL AGES, ALL INDUSTRIES, BUT ALL INSPIRING.”

Kate Sarri, Indigenous Australians Communications Lead
First Nations UNLIMITED Women in Leadership Summit QLD, May 2026

DAY TWO | Thursday 21st May 2026

The next generation of First Nations women are already leading

Kim Dyball (She/Her)

Executive Manager - Young Indigenous Women's STEM Academy, Commonwealth Scientific & Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO)

Ellie Cooper (She/Her)

Co-presenter

Gullara McInnes (She/Her)

Co-presenter

Kate Deane (She/Her)

Co-presenter

- **Systems change from the inside:** Representation inside institutions is not compromise, it is strategy. When those most affected by broken systems join them, they carry the power to reshape what those systems fund, value and make possible.
- **Deficit narratives limit what's imaginable:** When the stories told about a community centre only what's lacking, the solutions designed will always fall short. Leading from strength reframes the question and opens entirely different futures.

Building a leadership legacy without burnout

Jasmin Gentle (She/Her)

Operations Manager, GKB Impact

- **Legacy sometimes means leaving money behind:** Pursuing purpose over pay is not a sacrifice, it is a leadership strategy. Choosing proximity to community over salary builds the perspective, skill and credibility that no title or income can manufacture.
- **The same path that carries legacy carries load:** For women leaders, burnout is not a personal failing, it is the weight of holding culture, family, community and work simultaneously. Naming that load honestly is where sustainable leadership begins.

Leadership wisdom First Nations women are leading with

Dr Raylene Nixon (She/Her)

Senior Lecturer, Queensland University of Technology

- **Grief can forge unexpected leaders:** Leadership does not always emerge from ambition or preparation. It can arise from the depths of loss, where love and pain converge to reveal a capacity for courage that titles and authority alone could never produce.
- **Adversity reframes what leadership means:** Stepping up in the face of injustice, not waiting for someone else to act, is itself a form of leadership. The 'somebody else syndrome' dissolves when lived experience makes the personal undeniably political.

Making a difference through ethical leadership in community

Marjorie Anderson (She/Her)

NSW Aboriginal Woman of the Year 2025 & Head of Indigenous Affairs & Government Affairs, Lifeline

- **Community leadership carries collective responsibility:** Aboriginal leaders enter workplaces bearing responsibility to their entire community, not just their role. Organisations that fail to recognise this invisible weight misunderstand the courage ethical leadership in community actually demands.
- **Co-design is not consultation, it is power transfer:** Services designed without genuine community voice deliver the wrong solutions. True empowerment means giving away institutional power, asking communities to define both the problem and the answer and trusting that wisdom above internal assumptions.

Examining the power of culture & strength-based leadership

Helena Wright (She/Her)

Deputy Chief Executive Officer - Policy & Strategy, Queensland Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Child Protection Peak (QATSICPP)

Danika Ryan (She/Her)

Taribelang woman, Director - Equity, Diversity, Respect, Inclusion & Cultural Capability, Queensland Public Sector Commission

- **Cultural values anchor systemic change:** Earning genuine trust from community requires more than policy reform. When leaders root their practice in cultural values, they shift what the system expects of everyone inside it, including those who are not from that culture.
- **Disruption from within drives real reform:** The most transformative leaders are often those placed at pressure points within a system. Challenging inherited structures is not resistance but responsibility, especially when decision-makers remain unchanged and community outcomes do not improve.

“INSPIRING AND EMPOWERING EVENT THAT WAS TRAUMA INFORMED, CULTURALLY SAFE AND RESPECTFUL.”

Dietitians Association of Australia

First Nations UNLIMITED Women in Leadership Summit QLD, May 2026

“WHEN FIRST NATIONS WOMEN LEAD, COMMUNITIES GROW STRONGER, CULTURE GROWS DEEPER, AND FUTURE GENERATIONS RISE WITH PRIDE. THIS SUMMIT IS A SPACE TO STAND TOGETHER, SHARE OUR STORIES, AND REMIND ONE ANOTHER THAT OUR LEADERSHIP IS NOT ONLY POWERFUL — IT IS NECESSARY.”

Tamara Kerr, Together Queensland

First Nations UNLIMITED Women in Leadership Summit QLD, May 2026



ACTIONABLE INSIGHTS

BUILDING TRUST THROUGH TRUTH

Genuine inclusion begins with honest storytelling, not ceremony. When leaders name real history, shared ancestry and lived connection, they build the kind of trust that policies cannot manufacture and that communities can actually feel.

KNOW WHICH HAT YOU ARE WEARING

Leaders holding multiple community roles carry competing expectations simultaneously. The skill is not eliminating that tension but knowing precisely which community you are accountable to in each moment. Clarity of accountability is itself a form of leadership.

BECOME THE SOLUTION YOU WERE WAITING FOR

When systems are slow to move, stepping forward to create what is missing is not abandoning advocacy. It is embodying it. Impatience with the status quo, channelled into action, is one of the most powerful leadership moves available.

SUSTAINABLE LEADERSHIP STARTS WITH TRUTH

Burnout is not a personal failing. It is the weight of holding culture, family, community and work at once, often without acknowledgement. Sustainable leadership begins the moment that invisible load is addressed honestly rather than quietly absorbed.

PRESENCE PRECEDES INFLUENCE

The most underestimated leadership move is simply being present where decisions are made. Deficit narratives shrink what is imaginable. Leading from strength, and from the room, reframes the question entirely and opens futures that were never previously on the table.



“ATTENDING THIS SUMMIT WAS AN INVESTMENT IN MY LEADERSHIP JOURNEY AND NOURISHMENT FOR MY CULTURAL SOUL. I WALKED AWAY FEELING INSPIRED AND GRATEFUL FOR THE OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN FROM OUTSTANDING BLAK LEADERS.”

Sharon Sowter, Melbourne Archdiocese Catholic Schools
First Nations UNLIMITED Women in Leadership Summit QLD, May 2026





Meet the Artist - **PETA LINK**



Gooreng Gooreng/ Kabi Kabi woman living on Dharawal country, Award winning artist

Peta is a Proud First Nations woman and artist, who is a descendant of the Gooreng Gooreng and Kabi Kabi Nations of the Central Coast and Sunshine Coast of Queensland. Peta was fortunate enough to grow up in both Meanjin (Brisbane); Eora Country (Sydney) where she has grown inspiration from for her artwork. Peta is currently located on Tharawal Country (Campbelltown NSW).

Artwork Title - Grounded

About the Artwork - This artwork depicts a collective of leaders gathering and making informed decisions for our communities and ways forward for better futures for our people.

Facebook - @mangeearts
Instagram - @mangee_arts

SELF-REFLECTION WORKSHEET

We invite you to use this section to reflect on your key takeaways, the insights gained, and the value these learnings bring to your role and department. Let this be your space to connect the dots between what you've learned and how it can create meaningful impact.

Summarise the event in one sentence

Biggest “ah-ha” moment

Reflect on the most valuable lesson or insight you discovered during the event.

- What truly shifted your perspective or sparked a new way of thinking?

Key skills

- What are the key skills or knowledge you have enhanced as a result of attending?
- How have these improvements equipped you to excel in your role?

Practical Application

Consider the specific actions you'll take to implement your learnings.

- How will you apply these insights to benefit your work and organisation?
- What steps can you take to share these learnings with your team or manager to create broader value?

Presented by

THE HATCHERY

We believe that true power lies in shared knowledge, experiences and passion. From National summits to conferences and masterclasses, our curated events unlock potential, ignite ambition and arm attendees with the tools, confidence, and connections they need to achieve their dreams. It's our purpose to connect people with knowledge to inspire change.

GET IN TOUCH

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