# The Art of Inclusion Diversity Council Australia logoTranscript

## Season 2 - Episode 1 - Sorry business

### Mundanara Bayles

So I'd like to begin by acknowledging the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation because we are here in Sydney and also pay our respects to elders past and present. And by doing an acknowledgment, I know that I'm carrying out an important diplomatic protocol that's been practised in this country for tens of thousands of years...

…A lot of people that are passing in our community are under the age of 45. About 80% of the funerals that I've been to recently are all suicide and about 95% of those are youth. So the trauma that's associated with the grieving of whoever's passed away in the community is usually losing people too young and losing people to suicide. So it's a whole other layer of grieving, and a whole other layer of complexity when it's suicide.

### Andrew Maxwell

Thank you, Mundanara Bayles, for giving context to our topic and providing that acknowledgment of country. It's time to talk about what is referred to as Sorry Business. The cultural protocols that exist for death when it takes place in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander listeners should note, we won't be mentioning the names of anyone who has passed, but we will be having a wider discussion about Sorry Business; we have to.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders experience poorer life outcomes. Infant mortality is higher. On average, Aboriginal men live 11.5 years less than other men. Women live for 9.7 years less, and suicide rates in these communities are six times greater compared to the wider Australian community. While death is part of human life, the tragedy of deaths amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders is that they happen too soon and too frequently. On top of this, the rest of the Australian community is unaware of this trend, and the different cultural practises that surround loss.

Today we change that…

…I'm Andrew Maxwell, and I too would like to acknowledge and pay my respects to the traditional custodians of this land, to the elders past, present, and emerging on whose country this recording is taking place. This is the Art of Inclusion, a podcast from Diversity Council Australia or DCA. In our second series, we peer into the lives of fascinating people whose individual stories create the tapestry of diversity that make up Australia and its workplaces. Today, apart from me, we're just going to hear from our storyteller, Mundanara Bayles. She's the managing director and co-founder of cultural awareness company, The BlackCard. She's an Aboriginal woman whose cultural heritage is connected to the Wonnarua and Bundjalung people on her mother's side, and the Birri-Gubba and the Gungalu on her father's side. She starts with definitions.

### Mundanara Bayles

Sorry Business is a general term that's used to describe when someone has passed away in the Aboriginal community. Now, I'm not from the Torres Strait, so I couldn't give you a Torres Strait Islander's perspective and how they would treat Sorry Business. So from the moment someone has passed, we refer to that we've got Sorry Business in our community. And how long that Sorry Business goes for depends on that family and that community. It could go on for a week, it could go on for a month.

### Andrew Maxwell

As well as taking time, decision making around bereavement is also based on consensus. In the case of Mundanara's mother's death, resolving things took years.

### Mundanara Bayles

When my mum passed away 18 years ago, we buried my mum. She was only 45 years old, and she had a headstone, a block of cement, but nothing written on it and no picture there. So basically, there was a certain time after my mum passed, and then people started to talk about whether we wanted her name on the gravestone or her a photo there, and no one could agree. And in our society, it's consensus decision-making.

So after talking to all of our family over about 10 years, we all agreed that let's listen to the eight daughters. So I'm one of eight sisters and what we wanted was we wanted our mum's photograph on her gravestone, just like other people at the cemetery. So how we dealt with that in our own family would be different in another family.

### Andrew Maxwell

But choosing a picture for her mother was a difficult process. You may have seen the warnings before TV shows informing people that what follows may contain images of the deceased. So for some in her mother's family, having a headstone picture presented a problem.

### Mundanara Bayles

It's not a new thing for our generation, but it's a new thing for the older generation just to have a photograph of someone that's passed away because they believe that when you show somebody's photograph, or a video recording, or their voice has been played, you're bringing their spirit back to the present, and they don't belong here anymore.

So they're kind of trapped between the world that they've gone into and then the current world. So they've gone onto their next journey and that's why there's that message that's played usually on DVDs or documentaries, warning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander viewers about there potentially could be some people that have passed away.

### Andrew Maxwell

One of the ways death is different in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is the entire community grieves, not just the deceased's nuclear family or blood ties.

### Mundanara Bayles

The obligations in the Aboriginal world far outweigh, unfortunately, the expectations of the Western world. Obligations are not responsibilities; obligations, you don't have a choice. So you have to be at those funerals, and you have to support the family while they're going through Sorry Business. Because there's so much trauma in our society that we need to stick together and help each other because you don't know when it's going to be your family that's dealing with it.

### Andrew Maxwell

Another key difference is the sheer frequency of deaths.

### Mundanara Bayles

When I was working as an 18-year-old in the government, and I took off nearly 52 days in that year, and I could tell you at least 40 of those days were for funerals, and it was my traineeship. I had an opportunity to really get into the government and secure a good job, but because of all the leave they said that, “We can offer you a job.”

### Andrew Maxwell

And then there's the trauma.

### Mundanara Bayles

I have seen two people in my whole life. Two people that had passed slowly and painfully and that whole process is horrible to watch someone that you love pass away. Like I said, I'm 36 years old and that's happened twice, and I've been to hundreds of funerals and like I said, nine times out of 10 that's people that are dying before they even turned 45. Like in Wilcannia, which is an Aboriginal community here in New South Wales, the life expectancy for an Aboriginal male's 37 years old.

So just imagine growing up in a society where people around you are not making it to their 40th birthday. Your children don't get that time with your mum and dad because they both passed, and your grandparents have definitely passed on both sides.

### Andrew Maxwell

Workplaces have a role to play in making all of this more bearable. It starts with good policy, especially around bereavement and compassionate leave, cultural awareness education, and maybe even a Reconciliation Action Plan or RAP.

### Mundanara Bayles

So I suggest to people to educate your organisation, especially if you've got a Reconciliation Action Plan. So if you've got huge commitments and big targets in your RAP, then you need to be more proactive about how you're going to engage with indigenous people and then what support is in place that once you bring them into the workplace. Because it might be an easy job engaging with indigenous people and employing indigenous people, but I could tell you now it's not going to be easy in retaining indigenous staff because of the obligations to family and community. And that we're navigating these two worlds, it's never going to end, we're always going to be navigating those two worlds.

### Andrew Maxwell

With this in mind, it becomes important for workplaces to understand the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander world and the obligations that come with it. It's also vital to understand the role of kinship and community.

### Mundanara Bayles

It's not about proving how you're related to the individual. That's really important to understand that because we're a group-based people, people in my community have obligations to me, and I have obligations to them. So attending funerals and being part of all of the preparation for a funeral to go ahead, the whole community comes together and like wraps cotton wool around the family so that they can grieve. And the community try and to take care of every aspect to make sure that person is able to have their wishes fulfilled, whether it's a burial or cremation or going back to country where it could be their remains are going back. So it's so different for each individual, but it's never defined by a blood connection.

### Andrew Maxwell

Being flexible around paid and unpaid leave can make a big difference.

### Mundanara Bayles

I think that policies can be rewritten, and I know in few organisations that I've worked with, they had cultural leave, and it wasn't just for indigenous people to take cultural leave, it was open to all people. So it wasn't discriminating against everyone else in this special leave just for Aboriginal people. But you find that with that cultural leave, it could be spending time with relatives before they pass. It could be using that time to travel. A lot of us have to travel interstate for a lot of Sorry Business. So the time of work is not just attending the funeral, it’s usually takes a couple of days to get to the place, the location. So can you imagine even not working the cost for someone on Centrelink trying to get to all of these funerals?

### Andrew Maxwell

Workplaces need to understand that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees live in two very different and often conflicting realities. Mundanara outlines what she wants all employers to know.

### Mundanara Bayles

I guess just understanding the Aboriginal world that we live in as Aboriginal people in the Western world that we're now navigating and kind of have no choice but to navigate the two worlds, and just to understand that our obligations to family and community come first. As much as we love our jobs or we’re at university studying, everything is just dropped and put on hold and we’re straight to community and straight to family.

### Andrew Maxwell

While businesses may be apprehensive about the leave implications that come with Sorry Business, the benefits of engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees are great and go further than just adding diversity and talent to your organisation.

### Mundanara Bayles

I think with a lot of indigenous people, whether we're coming from disadvantaged backgrounds or even with my kids, I say they're quite privileged because I've got a business, and I reckon they live a good life. I know that a lot of our people are on welfare payments, so once you give one person a job in our community, I know that the rest of the community are going to go well if they can work in that business and what can't we? So you're giving hope to a whole community when you're employing one of their own.

### Andrew Maxwell

Ultimately, it all comes down to a commitment to learning, understanding, and joining Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in the unique challenges they face.

### Mundanara Bayles

If you have no understanding of Aboriginal culture, Aboriginal society, Aboriginal history, then, of course, you can’t empathise with us, and what we're going through. And put the support in place that needs to be there because it's not going to be the last time we attend a funeral. I think the understanding, and the education needs to happen in our workplaces. We've got a long way to go for workplaces to really invest in some deeper level learning, not just an online module where they're getting an introduction into the Aboriginal world. But actually, doing some deeper learning to meet with Aboriginal people and discuss this with their teams about what can we do to make sure that we're supporting our indigenous staff?

### Andrew Maxwell

The Art of Inclusion is a podcast from Diversity Council Australia. Andrea Maltman Rivera, and Sam Loy are the producers, and Lisa Annese is the executive producer. This episode included contributions from Simone Empacher Earl. You can keep the conversation going by reaching out on our Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter pages. If you like what you heard, check out the first season of the Art of Inclusion either from the DCA website, dca.org.au, or from your favourite podcast player. On our website, you can access related DCA research and training, including our Inclusion@Work Index, Closing the Gap in corporate Australia Report and our Engaging Aboriginal Australians Report. I'm Andrew Maxwell. Thanks for listening.