

Step up in support of First Nations Voice, or disappoint employees: DCA

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Employers that don't actively support a 'yes' vote in the Voice referendum are sending a "strong message" to First Nations staff, a diversity expert says.

In what is a "hard year" for First Nations employees, organisations must consider what they're implying by staying silent or on the fence about the referendum, according to [Diversity Council Australia](#) CEO **Lisa Annese**.

"I'm concerned about employers holding back and not taking a position," she tells HR Daily.

"In not supporting the 'yes' vote, in staying silent, you're in effect supporting the 'no' vote. So, you *are* taking a side, even though you feel like you're not."

Annese says the 'no' vote is "banking on that kind of apathy from employers" – and even if employers don't *think* they're being apathetic, "that's the effect of it".

And where employers are worried that by supporting the 'yes' vote they'll alienate people, she adds, "they're already alienating people".

"Not coming out [in support of 'yes'] sends a strong message and you will be already disappointing staff."

Employers make decisions all the time about complex issues without "universal agreement", Annese notes, so now's the time to "step up and be brave" as an organisation.

"If you are a RAP [[reconciliation action plan](#)] organisation, if you are committed to reconciliation, I think you're obligated morally to support what Indigenous people are asking for. Because if you don't do that, you are allowing the 'no' campaign to flourish."

Discrimination and harassment rising

Avoiding apathy is particularly important given that data from DCA's 2023 Inclusion@Work Index, which is yet to be released, indicates that First Nations workers' everyday exclusion experiences are on the rise.

The 2023 survey reveals 59% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers have experienced discrimination or harassment, up from 50% in 2021.

"You can't look at this data and not imagine that the conversation around the Voice isn't having an impact," Annese says.

"To be in an organisation where people are discussing you as an individual and your status and whether they're going to vote for you or not, that will have to take its toll."

Meanwhile [earlier research](#), which DCA conducted with the Jumbunna Institute of Indigenous Education and Research, revealed "a small amount of overt discrimination, but most of it is covert or subtle or framed in a way that isn't even intended to be discriminatory", Annese says.

"So, we identified things like appearance, racism, where people might question someone's indigeneity because of their skin tone."

That project also found that 39% of respondents carried a [high cultural load](#), in the form of extra work demands and the expectation to educate others to make the workplace culturally sensitive.

"As a non-Indigenous person, I've had to learn there's no shortage of information that you can find on how to be a good ally to First Nations people," Annese says. "There's no excuse for burdening your First Nations staff with that responsibility."



Lisa Annese, DCA

People "won't be okay"

Annese says it is critical for employers to take some of this "load" off First Nations employees.

"It's a hard year and it's about checking in on people, but it's also about not making your Indigenous staff have to be the spokesperson internally," she says. "It's about not overburdening them with the work, unless they want to step up.

"But I think it's about just checking in on them and making sure that they're okay. I mean they won't be okay, but the fact that you can demonstrate that you care is significant."

Further, Annese calls on employers to build more racial safety in organisations.

"It's something we're not very good at, and not because we're not well-meaning, but because we lack effective racial literacy."

This shift and accompanying policies should be co-designed with First Nations staff, she says.

"What the Voice is saying, is anything that is going to affect your Indigenous staff, make sure they're part of the design process."

DCA has a range of D&I information for workplaces regarding [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples](#); it also has dedicated [Yes! Campaign resource hub](#).

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