

ESG in Focus: Steelcase Australia launches first Reconciliation Action Plan

As part of its enduring purpose to be a force of positive change and unlock human promise, Steelcase Australia is proud to introduce its inaugural “Reflect” Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP). Designed for organizations and workplaces, RAPs provide a framework to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples through job opportunities, professional partnerships and cultural exchange.

Launched on July 7 2022, the Reflect RAP is the first of four plans, which serves as a formal commitment to create a diverse, inclusive workplace and build authentic relationships with Indigenous businesses, artists and communities. RAPs are part of a broader effort to move Australia towards a future of healing, respect and equality.

The reconciliation movement, established in the early 1990s, urges Australians to recognize the colonial injustices, trauma and lasting inequalities experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across all areas of life, from health to education, jobs, living standards and more.

“As an Australian who had lived abroad for 15-16 years, the more I learned the devastating history and lasting repercussions, the more I knew that reconciliation was something we had to be a part of in an authentic, meaningful way,” said Jason Taper, Steelcase Regional Vice President and Chair of the RAP Working Group. “A Reconciliation Action Plan makes tremendous sense for Steelcase, knowing our culture of creating opportunities and making a difference in our communities.”

With the encouragement of President and CEO Sara Armbruster, Steelcase Australia began laying the foundations for its first RAP in 2020 by establishing a RAP Working Group and hiring cultural liaison Julie Moore, the Principal of Koorimunication in New South Wales. As a proud Aboriginal woman of the Yuin and Dharawal Nations and a respected leader in the community, Julie agreed to guide Steelcase on this four-step journey and connect the company with stakeholders in Indigenous communities. After fulfilling the commitments in its Reflect RAP, Steelcase will develop three more RAPs – Innovation, Stretch, and Elevate – in the coming years.

“At the first meeting, my first comment to the group was: ‘If you’re here to tick a box, I am not your person. If you’re in it for the long haul and want to make a difference, then I’m happy to walk alongside you all the way,’” Julie expressed. “I felt convinced that the Steelcase team wanted to make a real difference. The questions asked and the questions that were asked of me – I just felt that the team was in it for the long haul.”

In her role as a consultant and cultural conduit, Julie connected Steelcase with Indigenous community leaders and shared valuable insights, learnings and advice. With Julie's guidance, Steelcase's Reflect RAP outlines a roadmap for change with over 30 action items and timelines across four pillars: Relationships, Respect, Opportunities, and Governance. Actions range from building and implementing an employment strategy for Indigenous Australians to enhancing anti-discrimination efforts, participating in National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee Week (NAIDOC Week) and National Reconciliation Week, developing a strategy to diversify procurement practices, enhancing the team's own level of cultural awareness and understanding, among other initiatives.

Embodying the Reflect RAP's message is a striking piece by Gerard Black, a proud Worimi man and artist. Steelcase worked with the National Aboriginal Design Agency to engage an Indigenous artist to create the original artwork for the RAP cover. After conducting face-to-face interviews with each applicant, the RAP Working Group unanimously chose Gerard.

"All of the artwork submitted was just phenomenal. We chose Gerard because we loved his process and passion. He really did his research on us - he even included our new Steelcase Karman chair in his artwork - and was able to interlace the company's core values with elements of Aboriginal culture, traditions and natural landscapes. We've had such great acceptance of the artwork. It will probably end up in many of our showrooms worldwide."

Named "'Yalawa Murray' Sitting spirit in Gathang Worimi", Gerard's finished piece layers color, shape and landmarks from sacred lands in an interconnected tapestry of ancient designs and patterns. "The underlying theme is to show connections between people and unlock human potential and promise," explains Gerard in his artist statement. "This is shown by connecting to elements of nature and culture including water, sun, bush and the deeper spiritual-cultural ancestral connection to this land."

The collaboration with Gerard is the first of many partnerships between Indigenous individuals, artists and businesses. With its Reflect RAP as a foundation, Steelcase will strive to forge lasting connections with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and become a conduit for change as it continues on its reconciliation journey.

Watch the recap video of this event and learn more about our journey in the RAP document.

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