

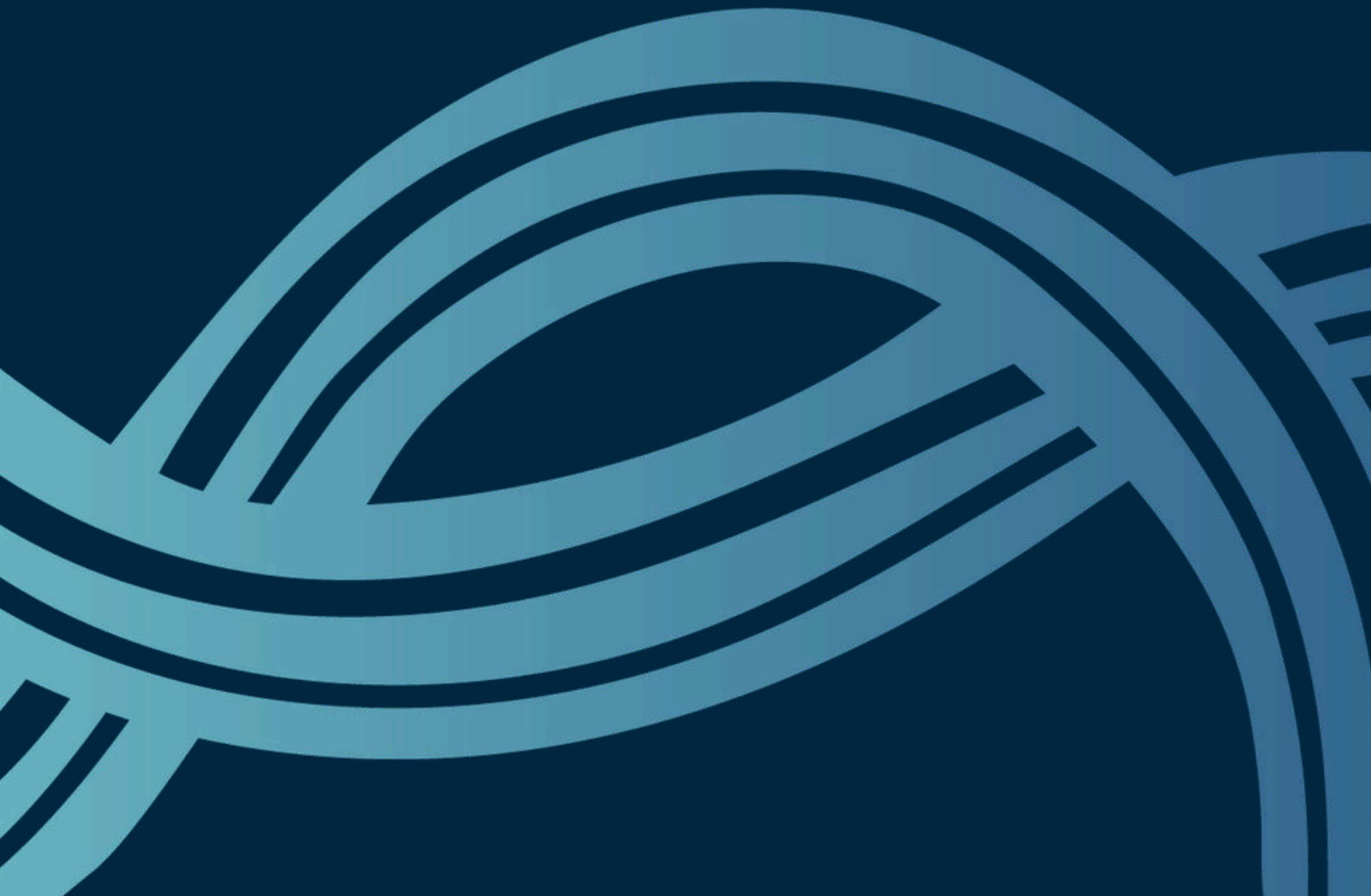


The Alliance

THE NATIONAL INDIGENOUS
EMPLOYMENT & TRAINING ALLIANCE

From Intent to Impact: Cultural Safety in Practice

Practical Guide for Employers



Acknowledgement of Country

The Alliance acknowledges Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and recognises the continuing connection to lands, waters and communities. We pay respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' unique cultures and countries across Australia; and to Elders past and present. We are all on the journey of reconciliation together.

Language and Terminology

We respectfully acknowledge that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have diverse cultures, histories and identities, and that individuals and communities may have different preferred terminology. We recognise that language is personal and contextual.

For the purpose of this document, the terms Indigenous, First Nations and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are used interchangeably, with respect and in recognition that no single term captures the full diversity of peoples, cultures and nations across this land now known as Australia.

Cultural Load and Colonial Load

We recognise cultural load as the additional, often unacknowledged cultural, advisory and community responsibilities placed on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples within workplaces and institutions.

In this document, we use colonial load to more accurately locate the source of that burden. These expectations arise from systemic inequities shaped by colonisation, not from culture itself. Our intention is to place responsibility with institutions and systems, not individuals or communities.

Disclaimer

This practical guide for employers is informed by the First Nations Employment Index, and includes information sourced from Lowitja Institute, the Australian Human Rights Commission and Safe Work Australia.

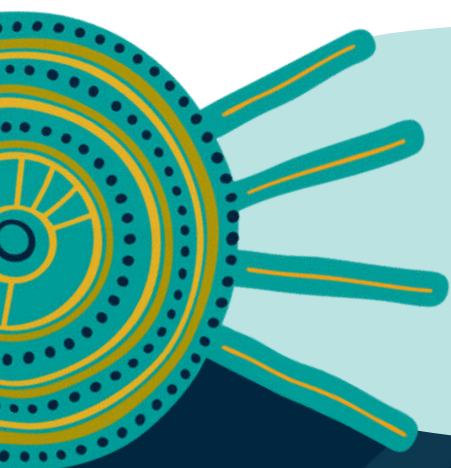
About The Alliance

The National Indigenous Employment and Training Alliance (The Alliance) is an Indigenous-led national peak body established in 2024 to strengthen leadership, advocacy, and representation across the Indigenous employment and training sector.

The Alliance was born from a historic National Gathering on Gadigal Country in 2023, where more than 50 Indigenous leaders came together with a shared purpose: to align Indigenous-led solutions with national employment reform priorities and close long-standing gaps in the system.

The Alliance is made up of over 20 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander owned organisations, who deliver a range of services including, employment services, accredited and non-accredited training, mentoring support, enterprise development, community development and engagement.

With a growing national footprint, The Alliance advocates for self-determined approaches to Indigenous employment and training, grounded in cultural integrity, data sovereignty, and community leadership. We work to empower Indigenous businesses, amplify First Nations voices, and drive systems change that delivers lasting workforce outcomes.



Guided by cultural leadership, trust and unity, we take responsibility for supporting strong relationships, encouraging collective action and championing evidence-based approaches that contribute to lasting, systemic change.

Purpose

To support the growth and impact of the Indigenous employment and training sector, contributing to closing the gap in employment & training outcomes.

Vision

A future where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are self-reliant, valued and economically prosperous.

Mission

To revolutionise the employment landscape by empowering the Indigenous employment and training sector to create sustainable impact for Indigenous people.

Cultural Safety

Cultural safety is when First Nations peoples feel safe to be themselves at work - proud of their identity, free to express culture, and confident to speak up without fear of discrimination. It is built through respect, trust and belonging, supported by leadership, accountability and a genuine commitment to ongoing learning and cultural capability.

The History of Cultural Safety

Cultural safety is a First Nations led framework that places the lived experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples at the centre of organisations and service delivery. The foundational concept originated in the 1990s with Māori nurse Irihapeti Ramsden in Aotearoa New Zealand, establishing that safety is determined by the person receiving a service, not the practitioner. It recognises the ongoing impacts of colonisation, systemic racism, and structural power imbalances.

In Australia, the health sector has advanced cultural safety by embedding it into professional standards, accreditation, and education. This historic foundation moved practice beyond cultural awareness toward critical self-reflection, accountability, and structural reform.

Today, cultural safety extends across all sectors including health, education, justice, child protection, corporate governance, and government policy. It is embedded in regulatory standards, workforce capability frameworks, and organisational strategies, reflecting a recognition that inequity is systemic, not sector specific. Its impact has been transformative and has reshaped institutional practice, strengthened Indigenous self-determination, and reframed safety as defined by First Nations peoples.

Cultural safety moves organisations from intention to impact. Integrated into governance, policies, and everyday practices, positions employers as equitable, responsible, and forward-thinking institutions.



Cultural Safety in the Workplace

The First Nations Employment Index 2025 (The Index) demonstrates that cultural safety must be more than rhetoric. Achieving this requires measurable organisational change embedded in governance, leadership, and accountability systems. The Index reveals that many employers still operate at foundational levels of practice, with only a small proportion integrating inclusive approaches across their organisations.

To build cultural safety, leaders must ensure First Nations perspectives and voices genuinely inform decisions and career pathways, supported by tailored development and visible representation in senior roles. Employers who embed these actions strengthen retention, boost performance outcomes, and enhance organisational credibility, making equity a lived reality rather than an aspiration.

Why Cultural Safety Matters

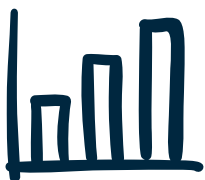
Cultural safety is not optional. It is a fundamental responsibility for all employers. For First Nations employees, cultural safety provides the conditions to enter, remain, and progress in the workplace without experiencing racism, exclusion, or cultural harm.

The Index recognises that racism and discrimination are serious psychosocial hazards under workplace health and safety obligations.

Employers have a duty to identify and address these risks and create safe, fair, and respectful work environments. Failing to meet this responsibility can result in disengaged staff, higher turnover, reputational damage, and avoidable harm.

Under anti-discrimination and workplace safety laws, neglecting cultural safety can expose employers to legal, financial, reputational, and operational consequences, especially when harm affects First Nations employees.

Embedding cultural safety proactively strengthens workforce capability, supports retention, and opens leadership pathways for First Nations employees, while also enhancing organisational credibility and trust. Achieving this requires more than awareness; it demands critical examination of policies and systems, accountable leadership, and meaningful engagement with lived experience.



The recent Index highlights that **only 28% of senior leaders have First Nations KPIs**, signaling weak accountability mechanisms and the continued invisibility of colonial load within leadership systems, affecting wellbeing and retention.

Cultural safety moves organisations from intention to impact. Integrated into governance, policies, and everyday practices, positions employers as equitable, responsible, and forward-thinking institutions.

Scenario Learning Case: When Awareness Doesn't Equal Safety




A large organisation delivers cultural awareness training and believes it has created an inclusive workplace. Soon after, an Aboriginal employee, Jarran, is asked to perform a Welcome to Country. When he explains this is not culturally appropriate, colleagues say, "We thought you'd know."

Later, jokes are made about "special treatment" when he takes cultural leave for Sorry Business. Jarran raises concerns with his manager but is told the team "meant well" and is encouraged to help educate others.

Despite the attempt of good intentions, cultural expectations are misplaced, racism is minimised, and the responsibility to fix the issue is placed on Jarran.

Psychosocial risks emerging	Failure to intervene: Likely consequences
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Feels unsafe expressing cultural identity at work• Experiences colonial load and emotional fatigue• Loses trust in leadership, fairness and accountability• Begins to disengage or consider leaving the organisation	<p>When cultural safety is not actively embedded, harm accumulates rather than resolves. What begins as minimised comments or misplaced expectations can escalate into chronic psychosocial risk, psychological injury, workforce attrition and regulatory exposure.</p> <p>These outcomes are foreseeable and preventable. Cultural safety functions as a critical control to protect wellbeing, retain talent and meet organisational responsibilities.</p>

Applying the Insights: Leadership and Systems

-  If you were Jarran's manager, what immediate actions would you take to address harm and restore cultural safety?
-  How would you address the inappropriate comments and behaviour made by colleagues in a way that does not place responsibility on Jarran?
-  What system, policy or capability changes would prevent this from happening again?

Cultural Safety in Action: From Intention to Everyday Action

What actions will we take to create and sustain culturally safe workplaces?

Challenge bias and embed genuine respect for First Nations cultures and knowledge into everyday decisions, policy and systems.

Actively confront racism as a workplace risk, address harm early, enforce clear accountability, and create a culture where staff feel safe to speak up.

Actively managing colonial load by sharing responsibilities, providing support and resources, and ensuring First Nations employees are not expected to educate others about their culture.

Empowering culturally capable leadership by developing leaders who act with empathy and accountability, centre First Nations voices in decisions, and visibly model inclusive, culturally safe behaviours.

Engaging in ongoing, practical learning that is tailored to local contexts, prioritises truth-telling and deep listening, and strengthens meaningful partnerships with First Nations communities.

Racism as a Workplace Risk: Preventing Harm and Strengthening Psychosocial Safety



Psychosocial Risk

Introduction to Legislative Obligations

Psychosocial hazards have long been recognised as contributors to workplace injury, but their formal regulation in Australia has strengthened significantly over the past decade. The Work Health and Safety Act (2011) established a primary duty of care to protect workers from both physical and psychological harm.

In 2022, the model WHS Regulations was amended and introduced the model Codes of Practice, clarifying how psychosocial hazards should be identified, assessed, controlled, and monitored in the workplace.



Safe Work Australia defines a psychosocial hazard is any aspect of work that has the potential to cause harm to a person's psychological health, and in some cases their physical health. These risks stem from the way work is designed, organised, managed, and supervised, as well as from workplace relationships and behaviours.

Common examples include high or sustained job demands, low job control, poor support, unclear roles, workplace conflict, bullying, harassment, and poorly managed organisational change. When these hazards are not effectively managed, they can contribute to stress, burnout, anxiety, depression, and other health impacts. Under Work Health and Safety laws, employers have a duty to eliminate psychosocial risks where reasonably practicable or otherwise minimise them.

Psychosocial Hazards: Racism and Colonial Load

Racism including covert racism and colonial load operate as psychosocial hazards under work health and safety obligations, requiring active identification, prevention and control. When racism and colonial load occur in the workplace, these unforeseeable sources of psychosocial harm negatively affect wellbeing. Understanding these risks helps employers create environments where employees feel valued and safe.

When First Nations employees experience respect, support, and cultural safety, they are more engaged, more likely to remain in their roles, and able to contribute fully. Workplaces that foster cultural safety benefit from stronger morale, better collaboration, and performance.



Embedding cultural safety into everyday practice helps employers remove barriers and support wellbeing.



Understanding how racism, covert racism and colonial load undermine cultural safety is critical to identifying and addressing psychosocial risk.

Racism

Racism happens when a person or organisation uses their power to discriminate, oppress or limit the rights of others because of their race.

(Australian Human Rights Commission)

Covert Racism

Covert Racism happens when subtle or unspoken behaviours based on racial bias cause harm but are often dismissed as unintentional.

(National Indigenous Employment and Training Alliance)

Colonial Load

Colonial load happens when First Nations employees are expected to educate others or represent their culture simply because of their identity.

(National Indigenous Employment and Training Alliance)

Racism

Racism in the workplace goes beyond obvious discrimination. In workplace settings, racism functions as a psychosocial hazard when behaviours, policies, practices disadvantage employees because of race or cultural identity.

Under Work Health and Safety obligations, employers are required to identify and manage these risks in the same way as other psychosocial hazards, including bullying, harassment, or excessive job demands. Where racism is left unaddressed, it creates conditions that undermine safety, wellbeing and fair participation at work.



The Index highlights that racism is often subtle or hidden for First Nations employees and are reinforced through workplace norms that prioritise dominant cultural perspectives. These conditions can leave First Nations employees feeling excluded or undervalued and unfairly positioned to carry colonial load.



Where covert racism and colonial load occur together, they create cumulative psychosocial harm that undermines wellbeing, engagement, and cultural safety. Addressing these risks through culturally safe leadership, systems and accountability increase retention, strengthens participation and supports First Nations employees to contribute and thrive.

Covert Racism

One of the most common ways racism manifests in workplaces is through covert forms that are subtle, normalised and often overlooked. In workplace environments, covert racism operates as a hidden psychosocial hazard that undermines fairness, inclusion, and employee wellbeing.

It appears through subtle behaviours, workplace practices, decision-making processes, and organisational norms that favour dominant cultural perspectives while overlooking or diminishing First Nations knowledge, identity, and contributions.

Unlike overt discrimination, covert racism is often difficult to identify, yet it can systematically restrict recognition, opportunity, and career progression.



The Index revealed that covert racism remains common across Australian workplaces, with racism frequently experienced as subtle, unspoken, and difficult to recognise, allowing harmful behaviour to be dismissed as unintentional.



The evidence also indicated that incidents of racism are not always thoroughly investigated or resolved, enabling harmful conduct to continue.



Many employees reported that cultural awareness initiatives were too superficial and failed to address deeper issues such as historical context and lived experiences, limiting their effectiveness in preventing racism.



Some employees also reported feeling unsafe about raising concerns due to fear of isolation or negative consequences.

Under Work Health and Safety obligations, employers are required to identify and control psychosocial risks, including those arising from covert racism and colonial load.

Addressing these risks through accountable leadership, effective investigation processes, and equitable workplace systems is critical to creating culturally safe environments where First Nations employees feel respected, supported, and safe to express their identity, while strengthening retention, engagement, and organisational performance.

Experiences of racism are often compounded by colonial load, the largely unrecognised responsibility placed on First Nations employees to educate others or represent culture without adequate support.

When covert racism and colonial load intersect, they generate cumulative psychosocial strain that increases the risk of disengagement, stress, burnout, and increased turnover.



Colonial Load

Colonial load refers to the often unseen and substantial responsibility placed on First Nations people to provide cultural knowledge and guidance in the workplace.

It occurs when First Nations employees are expected to explain cultural practices, historical context, or community perspectives, and to act as informal representatives on First Nations matters. These expectations are frequently placed on employees without recognition of the emotional and psychological effort involved, contributing to feelings of isolation, pressure, and exhaustion.

This additional responsibility can interfere with core job duties, as employees balance their professional roles with the ongoing cultural education for others.



Evidence from The Index highlights that cultural load (colonial load) remains a common and largely unrecognised experience for First Nations employees.



The Index shows that reliance on individuals to educate others, represent culture, or respond to broader social issues can intensify during periods of heightened public discourse, as seen with the 2023 Voice to Parliament referendum.



One employee saying, “The amount of people that came up to us and [asked] should I vote yes or no and I’m like, it’s not my job to educate you”.



When these expectations exceed an employee’s capacity, they contribute to ongoing stress disengagement, burnout, reinforcing inequity, and harming wellbeing.

Under Work Health and Safety obligations, employers are required to identify and manage psychosocial hazards, including those arising from colonial load.

Employers can reduce this risk by sharing responsibility for cultural knowledge across the workplace, investing in structured, organisation-wide cultural capability training, recognising cultural work within roles, providing safe reporting options, and embedding accountability within systems and leadership.

These actions support culturally safe workplaces, strengthen engagement and retention, and protect employee wellbeing.



Scenario Learning Case: When Cultural Advice becomes Colonial Load

A government agency is developing a new community engagement strategy. As the only First Nations team member, Marlee is regularly asked to sense-check language, explain cultural protocols, and advise on First Nations matters on top of her full workload. None of this work is formally recognised in her role description.

During meetings, colleagues often defer to Marlee with comments like, “We’ll let you speak for your people,” placing her in an uncomfortable position. When she suggests engaging local Elders instead, the team responds that timelines are too tight. At the same time, Marlee notices that decisions are routinely made without First Nations input, yet her cultural advice is selectively used when convenient.

When she raises concerns, she is told the team is “trying their best” and that her perspective is “valuable,” but no changes are made. Over time, the expectation to educate others, represent community perspectives, and navigate dismissive responses creates significant stress and fatigue.

Psychosocial risks emerging

- Experiences cumulative colonial load and emotional exhaustion
- Feels tokenised rather than genuinely included
- Experiences increased stress from navigating covert racism
- Develops reduced trust in organisational fairness and decision-making

Failure to intervene: Likely consequences

When cultural advice becomes colonial load and is left unaddressed, harm accumulates rather than resolves. What begins as informal requests for cultural input can escalate into tokenism, unrecognised labour and psychosocial risk.

Over time, this can lead to burnout, psychological injury, and workforce attrition. These outcomes are foreseeable and preventable and may expose organisations to reputational damage and breaches of Work Health and Safety and anti-discrimination obligations.

Applying the Insights: Leadership and Systems



If you were Marlee’s manager, how would you respond to colleagues deferring her to “speak for her people”?



How would you ensure First Nations perspectives inform decisions meaningfully, without placing the burden of representation or education on Marlee?



What changes to roles, expectations or systems would reduce colonial load and help rebuild trust?

Discussion Prompts

These questions are designed to facilitate discussion on how cultural safety is experienced in everyday workplace systems, behaviours and decisions, and how this intersects with psychosocial risk for First Nations employees.

Use the questions to guide group or leadership discussions about current practice and areas for change. These questions are not a compliance checklist; they are intended to prompt reflection, honest conversation, and inform practical changes.

Discussion questions for organisations



To what extent do our recruitment, onboarding, performance management and promotion processes operate equitably for First Nations employees, and where are these risks of unintended exclusion or bias?



How is decision-making authority structured in our organisation, and how are we ensuring First Nations voices are included, valued, and acted upon within those structures?



How are “leadership potential” and “readiness” defined in our organisation and whose way of leading and contributing are most recognised and valued within these definitions?



Do our wellbeing and support arrangements (e.g., leave policies, employee assistance programs, cultural leave, flexible work) adequately meet the cultural, practical and psychosocial needs for First Nations employees? And how do we know if they are accessible and effective in practice?



What capability expectations do we set for leaders in addressing racism, bias and cultural safety, and how are these capabilities developed, reinforced and held to account?



How effective are our cultural capability initiatives in changing day-to-day leadership and workplace practices, and how is this impact evaluated over time?

Self-Reflection Prompts

These questions are designed to support thoughtful reflection. Use the questions individually to reflect on your own assumption, behaviours and responsibilities.

The intention is not to judge, but to increase awareness, strengthen accountability and identify practical actions you can take to create a more culturally safe and respectful workplace.

Reflection questions for individuals



What assumptions do I hold about First Nations people, and where might these be influencing my expectations, judgements or interactions?



How do I typically respond when conversations about racism or cultural safety arise, and what do those responses suggest about my current level of awareness and capability?



How do I test whether my decisions about hiring, mentoring, or promotion are fair, consistent and culturally safe, rather than shaped by familiarity or unconscious preference?



How do I respond when stereotypes, jokes, or comments arise in the workplace, and what responsibility do I take to address them when they occur?



What actions am I taking to identify or challenge my own biases, and how am I holding myself accountable for contributing to a culturally safe workplace?



How aware am I of the cumulative impact that racism, colonial load, and isolation can have on the mental, emotional, and cultural wellbeing of First Nations colleagues?

Your commitment to learning and action is a powerful step toward embedding cultural safety and creating a truly inclusive workplace.

What impact will you make?



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