

2026 Observership Program

Induction Session — Resource Guide

A summary of the induction session, including the themes the cohort raised, the questions that arose on the night and some answers to help you head into the year with confidence.

About the Session

The 2026 induction session marked the official start of your Observership year. The evening opened with an Acknowledgement of Country, followed by a Program overview covering:

- What to expect across the twelve months ahead;
- Do's and don'ts;
- Observer obligations; and
- Making the most of your placement.

From there, you broke into small groups to share your aspirations, concerns and expectations for the year. Each group captured their reflections on flipcharts and a spokesperson shared their group's reflections with the wider room. The conversations were open and honest — and the themes that came through were remarkably consistent across the cohort.

The session operated under Chatham House rules. The highlights below reflect the collective voice of the cohort.

What You Told Us

Across the group activities, three clear areas emerged: what you're hoping to get from the year, what you're excited about and what's worrying you. Here's what the room said.

Your Aspirations

- Understanding how boards work and what makes a strong, effective director
- Getting across the not-for-profit and philanthropy space — including areas outside your current expertise
- Finding ways to give back to communities and causes you care about
- Working out what skills you bring and where they can be most useful in a governance context
- Learning about governance in industries and sectors you haven't worked in before
- Improving your strategic thinking and making the shift from operational to strategic

What You're Excited About

- Being part of high-level strategic conversations and seeing how decisions actually get made
- Being on the 'other side' of the table — seeing the questions boards ask and how they challenge management
- Meeting people from different industries and building connections across sectors
- The AICD training and the formal certification at the end of the year
- Understanding the relationship between a board and its CEO — where the boundaries are and how that plays out
- Bringing your lived experience and skills into a governance context
- New skills, new pathways and the challenge of stepping outside your comfort zone

What's Worrying You

Imposter syndrome came up in almost every group. If you're sitting there wondering whether you belong in the room — so is the person next to you. These concerns are normal, they're shared, and they do ease.

- Imposter syndrome — feeling underprepared or like others know more
- Confronting gaps in your own knowledge, particularly early on
- Not being a subject matter expert and worrying that limits your contribution
- The pace of board meetings — things moving quickly and not being able to keep up
- Workload and balance — fitting board meetings and training into an already full schedule
- Fear of overstepping — not knowing when to speak up and when to hold back
- Legal accountability and understanding where your responsibilities begin and end
- The social dynamics of the boardroom and fitting into an established group

Questions From the Night

The following questions came up across the group activities and in the room. Some are practical, some are about mindset, and some are things people weren't sure they were allowed to ask. They're all worth answering.

GETTING STARTED

I don't feel like I'm a subject matter expert — will that be a problem?

No. You are not here as a technical expert — you are here as an emerging leader with fresh perspectives and genuine curiosity about governance. The boards you are placed with know this and have chosen to participate in the Program because of what Observers bring and to support the development of the next generation of leaders in the governance space.

Bring your professional background, your personal experience and your questions. The AICD training will build your governance foundations. The Observers who get the most out of the Program are the ones who show up curious and ask good questions — not the ones who already know — or think they know — all the answers.

What if I feel like I don't belong in the room?

You do belong. You were selected through a competitive process based on your achievements, your leadership potential and your commitment to governance. The Program actively selects people who bring diverse perspectives and lived experiences — because that is exactly what our boardrooms need more of.

Imposter syndrome is almost universal in this Program — and beyond — particularly in the first half of the year. Sit with the discomfort, keep showing up and give it time. It eases. A number of Observers find it helpful to keep a journal — noting what you observe, what surprises you, and what questions came up. It helps you track your growth and reminds you how far you've come.

What can I do to prepare before my first board meeting?

A few practical things that make a real difference:

- If you haven't already, reach out to your Board Liaison before the meeting to introduce yourself and understand the board's expectations of their Observer
- Make sure to read the Board pack and give yourself as much time as possible to reflect and give thought to some of the issues the Board is facing — if the pack is extensive, focus on the areas you are most interested in or feel like you can contribute to.
- Familiarise yourself with the organisation — their website, annual report and any recent news
- Ask how the Chair prefers Observers to contribute and whether there's time set aside for Observer input
- Check your confidentiality agreement and remind yourself of the key obligations

The more context you go in with, the more you'll get out of the meeting.

CONTRIBUTING IN MEETINGS

How do I add value without overstepping?

This is one of the most common questions — and the tension is real. The practical guidance:

Contribute when invited, and when you do, make clear you're speaking as an Observer. A simple framing like 'In my capacity as Observer, I think...' signals self-awareness and is well received.

Many boards set aside time at the end of meetings specifically for Observer input. Check with your Chair or Board Liaison before your first meeting about how they like to run things. Some boards are open to contributions throughout, while others prefer a more structured approach.

Quality matters far more than quantity. One well-timed, thoughtful observation will do more for your standing in that room than filling every silence. Remember the saying “*Nose in, fingers out!*”

How do we change our approach from operational thinking to strategic thinking:

In an operational role, the focus is on doing — executing, managing, delivering. On a board, the focus is on oversight and strategy — is the organisation heading in the right direction, are the risks understood and managed, does the CEO have what they need to lead effectively?

As an Observer, your job is not to solve the operational problems you see discussed in meetings. It is to understand the strategic lens the board is applying to those problems. This takes a few meetings to click, but it will. The AICD training — particularly the sessions on directors' duties and strategy — will help you make this shift more explicitly.

What if the board asks me to vote?

Politely decline — regardless of who asks, including the Chair. Your role is explicitly non-voting. If it helps to have a form of words ready: 'I appreciate being included, but as an Observer I'm not in a position to participate in voting. I'm happy to share a perspective if that's useful.'

Board minutes should record that you attended solely in your capacity as an Observer and did not participate in any vote. If this isn't happening at your board, it's worth raising with your Board Liaison.

LEGAL AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Am I legally responsible as an Observer? What are my liabilities?

The short answer is no — and the Program has sought legal advice on this specifically.

Observers are not appointed as directors. You have no voting rights and you attend solely in a learning capacity. The legal definition of a 'shadow director' — someone the board habitually takes direction from — is very unlikely to apply given the nature and duration of the role.

Each organisation has been encouraged to review their Directors' and Officers' insurance to confirm whether it covers Observers. If you have concerns about your specific board's coverage, raise it with your Board Liaison or contact the Program team.

What is an advisory board, and how is it different to a formal board?

Advisory boards are a separate structure to formal boards of directors. Members of an advisory board are **generally not** classed as directors under the *Corporations Act 2001* (Cth) in Australia, as they lack formal decision-making power and fiduciary duties.

Advisory board members provide guidance, expertise and networks — but they do not govern. They cannot make binding decisions on behalf of the organisation and are not legally accountable in the same way as formal directors. However, they can be deemed *shadow or de facto* directors if they act like directors, influence board decisions, or make key decisions, making them liable under the Act.

This is worth understanding because some Observers, following the Program, move into advisory board roles as a stepping stone. Both are valuable — but the legal and accountability frameworks are different.

What if there's a conflict between a board meeting and a training session?

Prioritise the board meeting. Training sessions have recorded content and materials available — a board meeting cannot be replicated. If you have a conflict, let the Program team know as soon as possible so we can help you access what you've missed. Do not simply not attend the training without letting us know.

WORKLOAD AND BALANCE

How do I manage the time commitment alongside full-time work?

This is a genuine challenge and it came up consistently across the cohort. The Program runs February to December and includes eleven training sessions plus all board and subcommittee meetings.

A few things that help:

- Tell your employer early — their support makes a real difference
- Diarise every training session and known board meeting date now, at the start of the year
- Build in travel and preparation time, especially for evening sessions that follow a full work day
- If the load feels unmanageable at any point, contact the Program team early — we would rather problem-solve with you than have you burn out or disengage

Treat this like any other professional development commitment: protect the time, plan around it and communicate when conflicts come up.

I'm worried about not being able to give enough time — what if I can't commit fully?

The commitment is real and it is worth being honest with yourself about it before the year gets underway. Full participation — board meetings, subcommittee meetings and all training sessions — is what makes the experience worthwhile, both for you and for your host board.

If you know there are periods where your availability will be limited, flag this with your Board Liaison and the Program team early. We can often work around planned absences. What's harder to manage is unexplained non-attendance, which reflects on you and on the Program's relationship with that board.

TRAINING AND RESOURCES

What does the AICD training involve and how do I access it?

The training program runs across eleven sessions throughout the year, covering directors' duties and responsibilities, finance, strategy, risk and ethics. Four sessions are facilitated by the AICD, one by The Ethics Centre. The Theory of Change and the remaining sessions feature guest speakers and networking.

For your full schedule – refer to your training calendar.

You will receive links to recorded AICD webinars and access to the Cahoots learning platform, where you can review pre-recorded sessions. Registration instructions will be sent separately. Check the Program resources page for updates throughout the year.

Will there be additional opportunities to connect with the rest of the cohort throughout the year?

Yes — and this is one of the real strengths of the Program. In-person training sessions create natural opportunities to build connections across the cohort. A WhatsApp group will also be set up — details will be provided separately.

Later in the year, the Program will run a panel of practising directors, open for cohort Q&A. This is a genuinely valuable opportunity to ask the questions you've been sitting on across the year.

The network you build through this Program — across the 2026 cohort and the broader alumni community — is one of the lasting benefits.

END OF YEAR AND WHAT COMES NEXT

Will I be offered a board role at the end of the year?

It is possible — approximately one in four participating boards either extends their Observer or appoints them to the board. But it is not guaranteed and it should not be the primary expectation.

The Program's focus is on building your capability and offering you genuine governance experience. A board role *may* follow — at your host board, via your network or through the Alumni Program, where actively promotes opportunities for experienced alumni across the public, corporate and not-for-profit sectors.

Focus on making the most of the year in front of you. The opportunities tend to come to those who invest fully in the experience.

What happens at the end of the year?

The Program concludes in December with a final networking event. Your placement formally ends with your host board's last board meeting for the year. Any ongoing involvement with your board after that point is by mutual agreement between you and the organisation, outside of the formal Program.

Observers who complete the full training program receive a Certificate of Attendance. If you are hoping to be considered for a formal board role in the future, the best approach is to have that conversation with your Chair or Board Liaison at an appropriate time.

We're Here to Help

If something isn't working — a clash, a concern, something that doesn't feel right — please reach out to the Program team. We would rather hear from you early than have an issue go unaddressed.

NSW & Brisbane — Rachel Exton



rachel.exton@observership.com.au | 0447 592 515

Victorian Program – Catherine Reiser

catherine.reiser@observership.com.au | 0400 454 250

Victorian Program – Danni Zhang

Danni.zhang@observership.com.au

CEO — Cathy Robinson

cathy.robinson@observership.com.au | 0417 700 585

observership.com.au

Learn by Observing. Lead by Doing.