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### **A Case Study of Successful Project Management in Two Indigenous Communities**

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#### **Abstract**

This essay outlines some of the developmental, technical and operational issues in the provision of employment and training programs within community housing projects in the communities of Toomelah and Boggabilla. It offers, in the form of a community case study model, practical examples and solutions and demonstrates that, when projects are grounded within the community in which they are operationalised, that they can have successful outcomes. It is also demonstrated that by involving Aboriginal peoples from the local area and developing a sense of ownership that projects can offer individual and community empowerment and lasting outcomes for the future.

#### **Introduction**

This essay details a community-based Aboriginal Communities Development Program (ACDP) Project undertaken with the communities of Toomelah and Boggabilla. The ACDP is an initiative of the New South Wales Department of Aboriginal Affairs aimed at improving the health and living standards of Aboriginal communities in New South Wales (NSW). All NSW government funded programs involve the task of providing some form of employment and/or training to the Indigenous people who reside in the area of the program or project. Skills transfer through these programs and projects can be arranged relatively easily and are intended to enable participants to secure jobs in the wider employment market from their newly found skills on completion of the project. However, many projects have not produced these outcomes. Project managers have had success in these projects arranging either employment and/or training. This would usually be done by incorporating employment clauses into building contracts that specifically request the builder to employ local community members. Another approach is to enable a community building team to be established without the need to tender for the work, thus guaranteeing work to community members. This approach is commonly referred to as an in-house-bid (IHB). Both of these approaches satisfy the requirement of the project manager's brief. The objective on these projects has always been to provide employment and training where available, but not at the expense of infrastructure delivery. That is, focus on the construction within time and budget constraints and do what you can with employment and training.

The company, Maunsell Australia, was selected to undertake the ACDP project management for Toomelah and Boggabilla. The project aim was to deliver eight million dollars worth of infrastructure and housing with the underlying aim that employment and training in the construction phases be woven throughout the project to enhance the communities' pursuits of economic development. The housing component was completed in 2007.

The question of ongoing sustainable employment and what happens to the local community members on these projects after the government funded project has been completed seems to be given little priority. Instead of integrating the employment and training strategies into long term employment, the projects have only achieved piecemeal skills transfers. On reflection, past projects were simply skill transfers, neglecting the need for job readiness that included full completion of a training program, reestablishment of work ethic and lifting of self confidence eroded by long term unemployment and other social factors. We decided that the project to be undertaken with Toomelah and Boggabilla needed to plan for and then find some way to increase the chances of employment for Aboriginal people following the completion of the project.



Herein I examine how these factors were addressed and a strategy was developed to achieve the ultimate goal. A strategy which has its roots in the recognition and acceptance that Indigenous employment and training provision differs from the mainstream. Once we gave up trying to fit a 'square peg in a round hole', we were able to provide a strategy specifically designed for the problem. I recognise that all projects can have such successful outcomes. I offer critical insights on the thought processes behind the decisions made in developing the project, what actually happened throughout the project and an analysis of some of the issues to assess what constitutes best practice. I conclude by advancing the key attributes that projects must possess in order to seriously address sustainable employment outcomes for Indigenous people for the future. I put forward a suggested model that has potential for consistent achievement but each respective project's scope and size should obviously be created to suit the desired outcomes. Otherwise, employment and training will only assist in the piecemeal development of skills rather than long term employment for Indigenous people.

### **Indigenous community projects**

At the project level, the tasks undertaken by project managers are similar. The first step is to confirm that the scope of works remains consistent since the program was initially established. This is done through a combination of liaison with the community and engineering design. Once the concept is confirmed, the project manager follows the traditional delivery modes of design, procuring the contractors and administering the construction contracts. These projects are also an opportunity to provide employment and training to the local community members. Even though this is not a technical requirement of the project, it still falls under the responsibility of the project manager.

### **Developing the project**

The project goal was to develop a new strategy that would make employment our first and foremost goal and still remain within the confines of the program parameters. To achieve this we would need to change what we have always done and ask ourselves two questions, "what are the common factors in past projects that did not sustain employment?" and "what would the complete opposite look like?" These simple questions lead to the implemented Employment and Training Strategy and included two major facets: the introduction of private industry; and the involvement of training providers who specialised in Indigenous training. The following sections detail our thought processes and how we, the Maunsell project team, arrived at the final project delivery strategy.

### **Duration**

The projects initially involved construction periods of 1-1.5 years. This period was not long enough for people to elevate their skills to trades levels, which could be transferable to other works in the region. In the Toomelah project, the issue of duration was satisfied by achieving a three year housing construction program, which enabled some people to reach trades level and others to gain appropriate certificates. The more personnel that worked on a project, the shorter the duration of the project would become. This needed to be managed at the start of the project to ensure that the number of employees accepted into the project was dependent on the duration that we wanted. The project would not be pressured by the need to employ as many people as possible in the community. This would only result in many people in short term employment rather than some people given the chance to establish skills and qualifications that could result in long term employment.

### **Management**

The project team also recognised that community owned and run businesses did not last too long after the project was complete. Past projects that had developed community building teams with the objective of continuing to work in the wider community when the project was completed did not have much ongoing success because these fledgling building companies had little managerial experience in starting and sustaining businesses in the building and construction industry. As there is often a lack of a management skills base in the community, people often took on managerial roles by default. Sometimes it would be the Community Development Employment Project (CDEP) Coordinator, or at other times it might be the Council Accountant. Whoever it was, it was simply an unfair expectation on them to achieve goals outside of their relevant experience. Another problem with community run businesses with which we have been involved in are the pressures from the community. It may be in the form of keeping family members employed even if that business had hit bad times and could not sustain their employment. In these times a manager with a good business ethic is needed to make the decision to lay-off staff in order to save the business. To reduce these risks, we decided that we would recommend the introduction of a

private building company to employ local members rather than the community starting its own company. The operations of the company would have no linkages to the community. Over time the local members would be trained in management by established professionals who would then leave the business in that area to the community.

### **CDEP funding**

It had also become apparent that using community members who were linked to CDEP created reliability problems on the job. In the past we had run into problems with builders saying that they did not like to employ locals because they were unreliable and sometimes they didn't show up for work. We found through discussions with employees that this was the mindset of CDEP employees. That is, it is acceptable to pick and choose which days to work. When builders are trying to keep to timelines dictated legally by a construction contract, this is not a helpful scenario as the reality of commercial business is that deadlines must be met. Rightly or wrongly, we decided to enforce a condition on the incoming building company, which was that it would not use CDEP or government funded programs in its tendering. Trainees would be fully employed by the company and any unauthorised days off would contribute to the "three strikes you're out" rule. An outcome was that many of the trainees left the 'security' of CDEP to join the project to enable their skills development, which would improve the possibility of on-going employment and the chance to gain 'real work' in the future.

### **Training**

In our experience we found that the training offered by Technical and Further Education (TAFE) was not sufficient. Therefore, we decided to seek the assistance of other training organisations with specific experience with Indigenous people. We approached the Batchelor Institute of Tertiary Education in Darwin to provide the training. We had confidence that they understood how to deal with Indigenous people re-entering the workforce after they had suffered the psychological affects that result from past failed training programs and long term unemployment.

### **Developing the vision in the community**

We knew from experience that the new strategy, if it were to be successful, needed the approval of the community. We knew that the community had to accept and endorse the strategy or it would not go ahead. The community needed to own this decision. If they chose to accept the strategy, we agreed without question to support the community owned business venture that would take its place. We had hand-picked a builder from the Northern Territory who we had met on a previous trip to the Northern Territory. This builder had a long history of employing Indigenous people and being involved with Indigenous people and communities. After hearing the strategy and agreeing to be involved, the building company provided their credentials to the community leadership group and we spoke together of the strategy that we could implement. The community leadership agreed that this new direction was suitable. This might sound easy but the task of presenting the strategy and explaining the process was complex. Everyone needed to know what was going to happen and when and what impact it would have on the community.

### **Start-up**

Unlike other projects where the community would simply nominate prospective trainees, we chose to introduce an assessment process which involved interviewing potential employees and assessing their current skills base. We thought this would be the first opportunity for individuals to show initiative and commitment. We also believed that this would reduce the number of people applying because we did not have many positions available. Based on this process, 10 local men were successful in being offered positions that day. One of the trainees who couldn't be present on the day of interviewing managed to find the interviewer at his motel that night. The interviewer awoke to a very keen candidate at the door of his motel. For his demonstrated initiative, he was offered a position in the team.

### **Construction issues**

During the project an unexpected downfall also turned out to be one of delighted surprise. We had chosen the number of trainees that would suit the project schedule for three years. We chose a method of steel construction to compensate for a possible lack of speed experienced with a team of semi-skilled trainees building wooden frames. The two building teams completed eight houses in 12 months and then two packages of six houses each in eight months. The completion time totalled 28 months instead of the planned project program of 36 months, which made the construction period shorter and relieved these houses of termite risk. However, the trainees would not be able to gain skills in timber construction even

though the steel framed houses are built the exact same way as timber framed houses. The project satisfied this requirement by constructing timber frames in the shape of small houses. The trainers were able to assess skills appropriate to timber construction and the small “cubby houses” were donated to the local school. There were a range of issues with the training, in particular, the necessary development approvals to be issued and supervision. Unfortunately, some trainees were laid off for a couple of months while others worked on refurbishments in the community until the necessary approvals were sought. When working with companies that have a high proportion of Indigenous employees, it is obviously important to employ supervisory staff able to work with Indigenous people. Unfortunately, some supervisors did not possess such understanding and their employment was quickly terminated before extensive disruption could occur to the team.

There was also a misunderstanding with the CDEP operations. Because this was a community based project, the CDEP Coordinator thought that trainees could still be taken from the project building site to work on CDEP work. This could still happen but not without the approval of the building supervisor and not without compensation to the company. All parties had to be clear that the trainees were full time employees of the building company and no longer a CDEP resource.

Some community members were also not clear on the terms of employment of trainees by the building company. Some of the community did not seem to understand exactly what this meant. Issues between the employees and the building company were often brought to community meetings. As project managers, we explained to the community that staff issues were to be dealt with by building company management and the trainee in question, not the community. This confusion needed careful negotiation as what was required was a major shift in thinking. It is an example of the community pressures that can be placed on community owned businesses.

### **Elevating confidence levels**

We believe that fostering the elevation of confidence levels is equally as important as the elevation of skill levels. Confidence levels can be eroded by failed training programs of the past and the general depreciation of Aboriginal people that continues today. We found during our project that low confidence levels acted as an impediment to improving and gaining skills. When we first met the trainees, they were all quite shy, but the building of confidence over the years was quite astounding. We believe there were a number of reasons for this development. First and foremost was they had a real job. Not only that, but they applied for the job, they were interviewed for the job, and they beat a lot of other candidates for the job, providing a sense of achievement. They belonged to a team that had set goals and schedules to maintain, thus giving clear purpose to their work. The team was fully employed, giving them all a sense of moving on from short term project work. The builder recognised that all the trainees were family men and agreed to pay above award wages in recognition that they had families to support. In some ways this was also in recognition that most already had some building experience. This built respect and trust between the two parties. All of these factors contributed to the increase in self confidence in some way.

### **Current delivery methods**

The current delivery methods for government sponsored projects only cater to skills transfer and not necessarily the elevation of existing skills. Most projects in Indigenous communities are so small that the only thing achieved is some skills transfer. The Toomelah / Boggabilla project was an exception. On small projects the training and employment responsibility is passed to the contracted builder – the person least equipped to provide effective skills development. The builder is a business owner and focused on business operations. To achieve this, the builder is likely to have the Indigenous trainees performing meaningless jobs that have no influence on the timing of the project. These jobs will allow his skilled workers to concentrate on getting the work completed. In essence, you can not raise the confidence of a person in a particular job position when you continue to give them tasks below their abilities. In our assessment, if this is the only thing that small project can offer, then it will have a negative impact on the self confidence of workers. To overcome this, we believe that small projects need to be grouped in order to deliver the project attributes discussed earlier to achieve long term effects on employment.

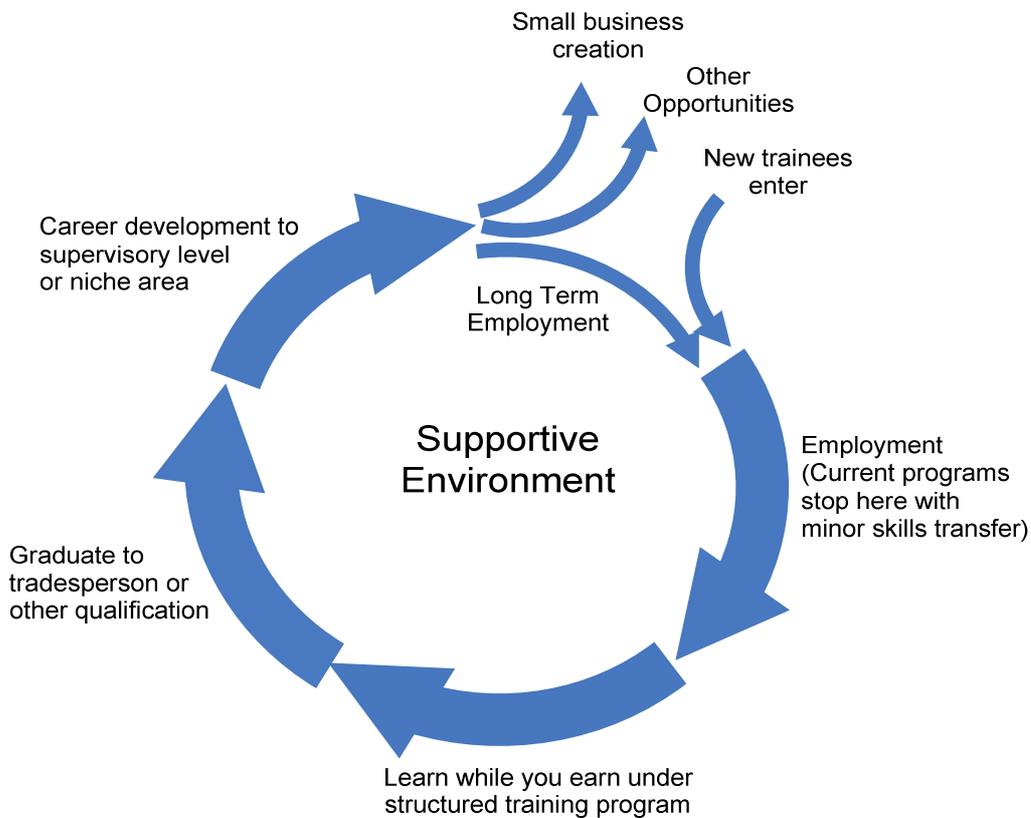
### **Future projects**

In the Toomelah and Boggabilla projects we adopted a holistic approach to employment and training and believe that successful outcomes can be achieved where control is exercised over the entire employment and training process. This includes:

- The initial engagement and employment of trainees/apprentices

- Provision of a structured on-the-job training program
- Graduating qualified tradespersons or other certified levels that both employee and employer are comfortable with
- Developing those tradespersons/workers to supervisory levels or continue to develop in a niche area
- Encouraging and providing support to the creation of small construction businesses

In essence, “closing the loop” on a process that currently stops at providing a 1-12 month skills transfer. See Figure 1.



**Figure 1** – Closing the loop on community employment and training

## **Conclusion**

Control means the program can influence the environment in which the long term unemployed are re-engaged back into the workforce. That environment needs to be a supportive one that helps to rebuild self confidence. Support must be provided in a way that recognises the difficulties associated with re-engaging back into the workforce, but at the same time expects those employees to show personal responsibility towards their participation in their place of employment. At Maunsall Australia we have also learned that successful programs lead with employment first. This is followed by a “learn while you earn” approach. The employment is on a permanent full time basis and employees receive award rates. The mere fact of being employed has the ability to lift self confidence very quickly. Training for training’s sake (i.e. without a confirmed employment outcome) has proved counter productive.

The duration of the program needs to be long enough for employees to gain trade/traineeship qualifications. Any shorter and there is a significant risk that employees will return to the unemployment lines and never complete the necessary training to get their full qualifications. The longer the project, the longer the employees can stay within the supportive environment and continue to build confidence. These projects do not necessarily need to be in the one community. A program management approach can enforce the alignment of projects in various communities so that a single building team may travel from one project to the other in order to achieve the on-the-job training periods required. It must be reiterated that programs need to focus on achieving employment goals first then design the infrastructure delivery to suit.

The project funding needs to be large enough to sustain the construction period required to produce qualified tradespersons. Funding also needs to acknowledge and accept that building costs carry a small premium, which reflects factors such as possibly having three trainees instead of a single tradesperson. Projects should engage private industry interested in developing trainees into tradespersons and possibly through to supervisory levels in that particular organisation. The aim would be to create future leaders in the construction industry, who may create their own small business should they wish to do so. A private building company can also enable a business ethic to be developed within the group. The advantage of a practising building company being involved in a project is that it understands the skill level and speed of construction required in order to compete in the open environment, make profits and keep a business sustainable. Their involvement ensures that the participants are taught to the required levels expected of the industry, which means that, if participants wished to seek employment elsewhere, they would individually be competitive in terms of skill.

A training organisation specialising in the training of Indigenous people is a necessity. Government policy of the past, together with long term unemployment, has had a detrimental effect on the psyche of Indigenous people. Trainers need to be conversant with and accepting of this and administer the training in a manner sensitive to these and other cultural issues. A training provider specialising in Aboriginal education gave us confidence that they would understand and address the multifaceted issues relating to Indigenous people and their return to work after a long delay. This impacted on the way training was delivered and its effectiveness.

This paper has been written from a housing construction perspective but there is no reason why this approach can not be translated to other industries. Its basis is in a holistic approach acknowledging and accepting the needs of indigenous people by fostering self confidence and work ethic.

Dennis Jose is an Indigenous engineer who worked for several years with consultancies Maunsell Australia and Arup delivering construction projects into Indigenous communities.