Local Matters

Locals Matter

A guide to the principles of privileging local employment in remote Indigenous communities

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Ernabella Anangu School

Dare to Lead
...partnership builds success

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Background

Since 2007, Ernabella Anangu School has been looking closely at how to bring young people back into secondary classrooms, prepare them for employment opportunities, and transition into work. Initially, this was a school based focus. In 2009, a partnership was formed between the school, Dare to Lead, Dusseldorp Skills Forum and members of the community as well as builders and tradespeople in the region.

The key purpose of coming together was to look at how we could develop a situation that prioritises local employment in the construction of houses and creates opportunities for young people to see an employment end point to their school based training. Housing SA (SA Govt) provided a housing contract for a local construction team to work on together.

The purpose of this document is to share the principles and the learnings from this process in the hope that we can encourage others to consider new ways of looking at local employment in remote Indigenous communities. This is not about finding social benefit funds to fund 'activity', although it is about pursuing social justice. This is not about better ways to make money, although it is about an economic reason to work in different ways. This is not a policy position paper, although we do hope to inform, shape and encourage change in policy and practices in remote industry.

We hope you will be encouraged to begin dreaming up an imagined future together with remote Indigenous communities that prioritises community voices and includes meaningful work as part of the story for remote young people.

The policy backdrop

From the early 1900s (some earlier) until the late 1960s, communities in central Australia began to formalise around cattle stations, missions and on the fringes of larger townships. Right across Australia, Indigenous Australians formed a large part of the work force and have worked in a wide range of industries. From cattlemen to well sinkers, builders to bakers and house maids to law men, Aboriginal people have a long history of working, often for no pay or rations alone, sometimes wholeheartedly and other times under duress.

In Ernabella, older community members have worked in all sorts of fields. Currently, the areas of health, education and the Art Centre is still a strong employment options for Anangu (Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara people), but it has probably been 30 years since resources and government services were so meagre that local employment was the only option for getting things done, with limited skilled labour and management support from others.

In the last decade, governments have tried to re-ignite local employment in areas such as construction through policy levers such as local employment targets, funding incentives for strong outcomes and financial penalties for poor outcomes. In the last 3 years, significant federal funds have been invested into remote housing and construction with strong demands and significant financial supports for contractors to ensure local employment is a priority. There are examples of mixed successes, but a shared understanding that this funding environment will not continue beyond the life of these current funding cycles. All of these policies and funding agreements have some excellent intentions and great momentum, but suffer from having been developed a very long way from the remote locations they arrive in and come with very high pressure financial and political imperatives attached. Policies and programs such as Closing the Gap, RSD (Remote Service Delivery), NTER (Northern Territory Emergency Response), SIHIP (Strategic Indigenous Housing and

Infrastructure Program) are all examples of recent, well funded, but externally imagined and driven efforts to make a difference for remote young people in key areas including employment.

Where is the imagination for a future that includes meaningful work beyond the horizon of this current policy cycle and has anyone remembered that buildings that last start from the ground up?

Why is local employment worth pursuing?

Can social justice, the economic reality and plain old common sense find a happy home together?

In 2009, Dusseldorp Skills Forum, Reconciliation Australia and Monash University (ACER) published the report "How Young Indigenous People are Fairing". It demonstrates clearly that whilst there is a "gap" between Indigenous and other Australians in key areas such as health, education and employment, the gap increases markedly as the level of remoteness increases. Indeed, it needs to be highlighted, that remote Indigenous communities present a "near zero" employment environment for young people. This is well known and will be of no surprise to readers.

We also know that the hard edged reality of beginning such grand ideas with a 30 year chasm in this type of approach is extremely tough. It is important to have a 'utopian' ideal of what can be achieved, but understand the path to that vision is decidedly pragmatic. Garth Boomer (1999) calls this the "pragmatic radical" approach.

Of course, we will argue here that social justice alone is reason enough to continue to pursue employment realities for young Australians living in remote communities. This is not in dispute. We will also argue, however, that there is an economic logic to pursuing local employment seriously, rather than co-locating expensive offsite training and 'activity' for local people where the pinnacle of such programs is installing clotheslines and fences after the "real" work is completed. We also want to argue that it simply makes common sense in terms of community life that people can and should have active and meaningful engagement in the community they live in. We will argue here that an 'inside out' rather than an 'outside in' approach to building this 'happy home' is the only way to go.

We believe this is a home worth building.

Principles for privileging local employment

It needs to be understood that every community is unique and if you are looking to work with communities in any form, you will need to have a strong sense of the history, the culture, language and environmental dynamics that make it unique. In this section, we are highlighting some general principles from the work we have undertaken with young people in the community of Ernabella. These may be useful but are not necessarily reproducible in other contexts in exactly the same way. As you get to know the context you are working in, these things will become clearer.

Starting from the inside out

As mentioned previously, any project that is planned with remote communities needs to understand how the community works and also understand that each community has different dynamics. This includes weather, remoteness, family groups, local language(s), community histories and power relationships in formal and informal decision making situations. There also needs to be a clear understanding of how cultural practices and values influence the attitude and approach people have towards work.

Ideally, it is important to take the time to build this understanding, or work closely with people that can bring this to the team. This is about coming together on an equal footing with community members. Many organisations 'consult' where they come from an unequal power position and do not take the time or leave the room to really hear and understand the critical information they need to make things work effectively. Often "consulting with the community" is as simple as firing a few questions at a few members of the community who give a few standard responses that they believe the consultant wants to hear. This is common in many Aboriginal cultures where trust is low or relationships are not robust enough to venture away from this formula. It can leave the consultant thinking. "That's what I thought", but this process often results in the mirroring of the information and non-verbal cues the interviewer provides. Aboriginal people have seen this all before and know the formula. They probably know what you're thinking and what you want to hear.

So in order to get off on the right foot, local employment endeavour needs to be closely aligned to the passions of the community, which are often not going to be heard after a couple of quick trips and 'power laden' conversations.

In starting with the community, it may be that things can change. Plans, project goals, processes and people as you go along. It is important to have a clear sense of the things that are flexible and the things that are not negotiable. Programs or projects that begin from a position of having little left to negotiate on often find that community buy in is poor.

In the case of the Ernabella housing project, we took a long time to talk with a wide range of people on a number of occasions in a number of forums. These included formal meetings with the school governing council, individual discussions in a quiet place, round table forums with multiple agencies and potential partners or sitting outside the art centre with senior members of the community. One thing that came from this process was that the community talked fondly about periods in the past when local employment in construction was strong and pointed us to people that were important team members in those periods. We found archival footage of this work and made a community DVD to share the story. Many of the school lads had no idea and couldn't believe they were living in a house that was built by Anangu as they had never seen this happen before.

By building this shared understanding, any project you undertake has a much stronger level of community support. This is important for success, but also underpins good practice and ethical engagement by sharing the information and the power of the process.

Undoing the "time is money" imperative

One of the challenges of privileging local employment, particularly in construction, is that supply and demand is out of balance in comparison to metropolitan and even rural contexts. There is great demand for work to be done with few contractors available. Compounding the issue is that much of the work is linked to a government contract and so costs are driven higher in order to meet politically oriented timelines.

As we've been discussing earlier, things take time to develop relationships, confidence and trust. We haven't even begun to venture in to building a team, developing work habits and disciplines, skills and so on. It is a natural tendency, then, for contractors to assume that there will be no time for, or point in looking at local employment, so costs are factored in to contracts to bring skilled labour from very distant places. In some quarters, this is referred to as the FIFOs (Fly In, Fly Outers).

In this environment, local employment is already on the cutting room floor before tendering begins. In turn, community do not build an imagination that they might be able to be involved in the industry because they have seen this pattern repeated over and over again.

In all of the examples we discussed of successful local engagement in the construction industry, a key ingredient was the process of building skills and confidence over time. As the momentum grew, work became more skilled, faster, and subsequently, cheaper.

This is a difficult impasse between cycles of government activity and funding cycles, the free market with supply of skilled labour low and demand for services high, and a community labour force that has been sidelined from the fast lane of this environment for 30 years. One approach that is currently being undertaken is to provide off-site supports to build skills and confidence. This has proved difficult, though, as the process of working from the inside out with the community and building relationships is often cut short and by the time a group of men are ready to move past off site welding classes, most houses have already been built and the opportunity is lost.

If you are in the fortunate situation of having more time to complete projects, the process can take longer, but local labour is always far less expensive and this can be accounted for in completing a project on a similar budget, but longer timeframe.

Relationships and trust is the golden egg

In working with remote Indigenous communities, it needs to be reinforced; there are no short cuts to building relationships and trust. One of the by products of high numbers of 'visitors' (whether they be government employees, tourists, mining companies, researchers etc) taking short cuts in this regard is that environment of low trust is created, resulting in an aggressive state of passive resistance to the latest person rolling through town with a story and a deal. There are no short cuts to ethical engagement with communities.

There are some very good examples where a group of people have developed strong relationships over time with communities and/or regions. It may be that they will not necessarily be the person remaining in the community, but by providing a quality induction for new team members and introductions/handovers in the community, trust can be transferred under an organisational banner where a continuity of relationship is maintained, and a consistent commitment to ethical engagement with the community remains.

In some cases, individuals can break the trust that exists with the organisation in a heartbeat. In other cases, an individual may have built up long term trust relationships, but begins to take short cuts to the detriment of the community. In such cases, trust and goodwill can evaporate very quickly.

It is important to consider how the team might be structured in view of the need to nurture strong and trusting relationships. In an employee/employer type relationship, it is a good idea to leave decisions where conflict may arise and hard professional conversations are necessary to a third party. In many Aboriginal cultures, refusing help or having a hard conversation erodes relationships and is best avoided where people are closely connected in their work. Many Aboriginal family structures take this into account. For example, the parents of a child may not discipline the child sternly but when required, the father's brother or cousin or other relationships will take on that role to allow the parents and child to maintain a positive relationship.

Collective ownership as a help and not a hindrance

Western society struggles to come to terms with how to build a sense of 'ownership' for individuals in regards to housing in the remote contexts. There are major assumptions in this thinking that butt up against significant differences in world view on some key issues. One major assumption is that individualism rather than collectivism is the driving force that brings someone to want an asset such as a house or a car that is recognised as an asset that belongs to an individual. Many remote Indigenous people do not aspire to the neo-liberal pursuits that our systems are built on. For example, a child growing up in the city might be thinking about employment, career type, work and travel opportunities, what course, where to live etc. When mainstream Australians meet, the two things that are generally discussed are someone's name and what their occupation is. For many remote communities, neither is particularly important. The connection of family, country and social context is how people validate their identity. In other words, WHO you are and WHERE you fit in is the important identifiers, not WHAT YOU DO.

In many places, programs have tried to encourage Indigenous Australians into home ownership and other things by removing barriers that may exist in the system. Rarely has a system thought to integrate other values systems in order to have a better outcome all round. Home ownership is also not possible in many remote communities as the land can be under varying forms of native title agreements, often ruling out the ability for an individual to 'own' a piece of land and property.

One of the key ideas that was interesting in researching for our project was the idea that family groups can feel a sense of ownership over a house or group of houses. In Ernabella, successful building teams were developed in the past by allocating a house or group of houses to a collective (such as a family group). It was then the responsibility of the family group to provide support in designing the house for the needs of the group, a labour force, and a commitment to caring for the house(s) once they were built. Many of those houses are still going strong 30 years on. An individual who has to bear responsibility for rent, bills, cleaning, maintenance etc soon finds it all too hard and gives up if the wider family group sees that the responsibility is not shared and don't help with costs and help keep the house in order. There are systems where costs can be shared automatically amongst a group who use a house and a collective accountability is in place.

Building the narrative

In the community context, it is important that the work being undertaken "means something" to the community. As a visitor, it can be hard to understand that over time, so many people come and go, that you will seem like just another potato in the sack, even if you are very passionate about the project you have and the potential benefit to the community. This is all linked to the relationship section above, but moves to the task that needs to be undertaken. It is important that you take time to build the message about the work that is planned. You need to find a way to clearly communicate the message about the project and make sure that this is not a "tick-a-box" consultation that moves on and doesn't return once complete. In other words, in order to work productively and ethically, you need to ensure that all of the key stakeholders are informed about the project and have an opportunity to ask questions or contribute in some way.

In the remote context, you will not always understand the social context as there are many layers 'hidden' beneath the formal structures that are in place. This means that you need to work with the formal structures such as the council, organisations in the community and service providers, but you also need to find out who the powerful decision makers are in the less formalised sense. This could mean people who speak for the country where you intend to get involved. This may include strong family groups and strong voices that need to be involved to give confidence to others that you are

"authorised" in the community context. It may be that there are people who feel that they represent the local construction field because of previous positions or involvement they may have had.

Working ethically in remote communities involves an understanding that things change all the time. It is important to continue to talk with a wide range of formal and informal groups and to ensure that, where possible, the whole community is represented in some way. 'Talking to the council' is often one of the least efficient ways of ensuring wider community support, but is a critical part of the process.

You need to be able to communicate the key messages clearly and across all of the groups mentioned. WHO are you? WHY are you here? WHAT do you want us to do? HOW will you do this and HOW will it benefit us? WHEN we finish this, what next?

Honesty in the message is critical. Remember, you're not the first person who arrives in the community with a great idea. In fact, the community has a whole range of names for people JUST LIKE YOU who've been and gone so many times before. Minga, FIFO, seagull, blow in, clouds, walypala and JAFO are just some of the terms that exist in the remote vernacular to describe people just like you! Remote communities are very experienced at quickly summing up your motives and deciding whether they will buy in or not. If you're not completely up front about your motives such as who is paying for the work and why etc, you will get caught out sooner or later and people will not necessarily feel obliged to share the fallout with you. This is all part of working ethically.

Building partnerships

One of the key challenges in privileging local employment, particularly in housing, is that construction activity often comes and goes sporadically. The funding is usually a government source and therefore there are deadlines, political imperatives and wider public scrutiny of the process. Contractors who take on work in these times are usually not going to have time to build the relationships and work with the community to develop an 'inside out' approach. Inevitably the 'outside in' model is reproduced time and time again with varying degrees of skill and varying levels of commitment to privilege community benefit over profit margins.

This means that individuals are sometimes more flexibly positioned to make strong commitments to local employment where an opportunity exists. As an extension to the previous section 'building the narrative', it is important that partnerships are developed in and with the broader industry. In any remote context, sustainability is fraught with difficulties in delivering services. Some of the challenges include housing and accommodation, changing political priorities, long term funding models, staff turnover, the social context of the community and so on.

A challenge here is that working from the inside out is best begun small, but can result in vulnerability if a key resource or person is suddenly no longer involved. This needs to be accounted for in the planning. Starting small is a great approach, but it is important to ensure that partnerships exist that allow access to other alternative resources such as skilled workers, alternative (or additional) funding sources and so on. The narrative builds the partnerships. It is important that partners who may represent larger organisations are on board with the underlying principles that you are operating from so that a consistent approach is maintained.

If you are starting small and begin to build successes, you also want relationships with larger organisations who can promote the successes and help you take the next step. Who knows, you may even start to influence the systems that exist.

Building the disciplines – Looking back, looking forward

Another cultural difference that needs to be considered is that western neo-liberalists (your average Joe) will argue the logic and the need for local employment from the paradigm of 'a better future'. In many remote Indigenous communities, the strength and imagination for the present is not often derived from the inspiration of an unseen future, but the inspiration of the past. As a visitor, you can find yourself thinking that there is no concept of self motivation or discipline. This often manifests itself in phrases like "people don't WANT to work". This is a mistake commonly and easily made. Building a motivation is critical. This is why we have been careful to talk through the importance of relationships, ethics and the story you want people to join in with. It may well be true that in a community where young people have never worked or seen family members work, the starting point for engagement begins with the struggle for motivation and the challenge of self discipline. Motivation, imagination and self discipline begin internally and are a choice we all make as individuals. An improved checklist of skills or a new funding model for more trainees is not an answer to this issue, merely tools to support people who are taking on the challenge, beginning from an intrinsic motivation.

In remote communities, a legacy of high levels of motivation, self discipline and imagination exist. If they didn't there would not be a community. Particularly in desert regions, mere survival required high degrees of all three of these things. Since colonisation, Aboriginal populations have proved to demonstrate high degrees of adaptability to sudden and vast changes and to maintain mastery of a number of disciplines. In the Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara context, Anangu carried the weight of a vast range of industries and professions from cattlemen, camel men, police aids, gardeners, shepherds, educators, ministers, builders, politicians and political activists, health workers, artists, bakers and so on. It is not that people lack the capacity for the mastery of various disciplines or the imagination to reinvent the field of engagement, but people cautiously choose the forums they invest themselves into. If your project is done and dusted in short timeframes, communities may simply allow you to come and go, wait it out, and see what comes next.

So in arguing the logic for engagement with local employment, it can be helpful to understand the history of the community you are working in, what deeply held values and motivations have made it the place it is today, and who are the people in the community that can model the imagination, motivation and self discipline required to succeed in the work. Even if you can't see it initially, they are there.

It is important, too, to have a clear understanding of the concept of reciprocity that drives the social fabric of many remote communities. In the current policy climate, this can be difficult. So many service providers are based a long way from the communities and drive through and 'give things out' in time to leave again. Whilst this seems like a good idea, communities build a sense that you won't be around long and deeper commitments to engagement and employment take longer to develop. I recently heard a story of a man standing outside a remote community office next to an Anangu woman. An older man came around the community and said to the woman, "What's this whitefella giving out?" The woman replied, "That's not a whitefella, that's your brother in law." The man left hurriedly, quite embarrassed, saying, "I thought he was one of those people that gives things out."

If you want community members to make deep and disciplined commitment to the project you are proposing, you cannot buy your way in with rulers, T-shirts, footballs, caps stickers etc. You have to model the values and commitment you wish people to reciprocate with.

Building the field

Assuming you have engaged with the community, built partnerships, got a team up and going with some basics, it is important to map out a course for 'widening the field'. In other words, people need to know, "What's next?" For young people to go from having no work history to the expectation of thriving in a high pressure skilled labour force is obviously unlikely to succeed, but it is also a mistake to plan ongoing 'accredited training' or offsite activity, or fences and clotheslines after the fact type of approaches without a plan to move beyond these fields as soon as possible.

This principle is the same if you are learning to read, play a sport or play a musical instrument. In Ernabella, the older men who had a long history of successful employment talked with pride about the times they took on big challenges and got the job done. This included working in mainstream work forces for intensive periods to build a higher degree of skill in a narrow field (eg. brick laying), travelling long distances in teams and taking on younger family members and training them to do the same. We heard many stories of projects done by local labour forces, sometimes travelling thousands of kilometres to build a house or a community office block or a store.

A key question in accessing employment from the remote context is, "Will people leave the community to get a job?" Unfortunately, many Indigenous employment programs are built on the expectation that people will. The reality in many contexts is that people won't. But this doesn't mean that people will not be prepared to do short intensive periods out of the community when they have the skills, confidence, purpose and motivation to do so. To expect people to arrive on the doorstep with all of these things in hand is unrealistic. This is why it is critical that potential employers begin to engage at both ends of the work readiness continuum.

Building the field with non-local professionals and team members who commit to the project is also equally important. Selecting the right people to be involved requires a strong understanding of the person's background, experience and ability to work flexibly and collaboratively under various stresses that inevitably arise in this type of work. Providing an induction and introducing potential project members to the context prior to commencement is important as every community is unique and it is important to realise that some situations may not be the best fit for the staff for whatever reason.

The ability for team members to work from a common understanding of the project goals is also critical and needs to be explicitly laid out prior to commitments being made to engage team members. Remember that all the good intentions and goodwill in the world can quickly evaporate in this challenging environment and this is the point at which the true test of a person's suitability for the context begins. Successful projects in remote contexts are inevitably heavily reliant on people and their capacity to undertake this sort of work. Successful practice is not easily "mandated" or "systematised" and so choosing the right people in the right roles is critical. A key lesson we have learned is to also ensure that the ongoing supports in liaising with the community and providing logistic supports needs to be based in the community.

In remote communities, there are complex social obligations embedded in relationships and many community members do not delineate between the "personal" and the "professional" aspects of the relationship you will develop. In order to maintain a positive working relationship, it is important that there is an ongoing support provided by a third person who is also in the community. An example of this would be a local team member who may be experiencing family or financial issues may come to the project team leader because they have a trusted relationship. They may expect that the other person will value the relationship by 'helping', which is commonplace in a social context where reciprocation is the socially expected norm in respectful relationships. Refusing to

'help' (lending money, offering a ride, ringing service providers for the family etc) may erode the relationship which is vital for ongoing success in the project. In this case, having a 'third party' to refer to for supports and even a voice that can say 'no' and allow a productive relationship to continue on-site is an important consideration in structuring a successful project.

Building sustainability – (now you've got a horse, make some carts)

Secondary educators in remote communities feel the frustration in working with young people in schools with the full knowledge that there is no employment end point available in the community. There are a number of community schools where school have been proactive in preparing students through training, onsite work experience and organisational partnerships to promote the development of an employment environment. In a sense, it feels like trying to build a horse to go with the cart.

There are many organisations that can support young people to be ready to flow through into employment. These include schools, RTOs (Registered Training Organisation), GTOs (Group Training Organisations) JSAs (Job Service Agencies), community programs such as CDEP (Community Development Employment Program) and others that may be unique to the community context.

A functional worksite in the community presents an opportunity to provide onsite experience and skill development for young people who may potentially be able to work as an employee in the project. In the current policy climate, there are numerous funding and program options to support this.

As things develop, it is important to have support and partnerships with individuals and organisations who can stay connected to industry, policy makers and other operators to ensure there are ongoing discussions to look at what can come next to build on the successes. In some cases, DEEWR funded partnership brokers can be useful to make links and provide information.

In all of this discussion, any program is only as good as the people who are involved. Some organisations are very strategic in developing shared values across the whole of the organisation, but inevitably, these types of projects tend to rely heavily on the skills and capacity of few (or one) individuals. There's an old saying, "whitefellas are like (govt) Toyotas, once their 80 000kms is up, you have to change them over." As visitors in remote communities, we all wear out. This needs to be factored in to planning for managing yourself and others. You need to ensure there are others in the team who can be available to step in and pick up the slack if someone needs to leave or other unforseen situations arise. This is another strong argument for building partnerships with larger organisations that may have some flexibility in their staffing capacity. It is important to develop some relationships that are able to stay connected through the work. At some point, someone might need to say, "I can see you need to have some time to recover your personality" and make sure that staff are both protected and accountable.

Part of an ethical and sustainable process is the need to report back to the community on the successes and failures that may have occurred along the way. This allows the community to share in the learning that occur in these types of projects and allows communication to remain open for the future.

Making it happen

There is definitely an appetite for an inside out approach to local employment in remote communities. As outlined, there is more than a 'gap' in employment opportunities for young people in remote communities in comparison to the broader Australian population; the gap stands as a yawning chasm.

Many Australians ask, "How can I get involved?", but it is difficult to know where to start and how to engage in a way that is both meaningful and ethical. The key thing is to open a dialogue and have a discussion. Make a start by getting to know people and the world they live in.....you never know what might happen!

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