

## Aboriginal Employment in the Northern Territory Public Sector

### Ms Trish Angus

Executive Director

NT Department of Local Government & Housing

PO Box 4621

Darwin NT 0801

Australia

Executive Director Policy and Program Development in the NT Government Department of Local Government and Housing and Sport (DLGH).

**Trish** has extensive experience in policy development, service delivery and senior management both within government and non-government sectors, mostly in the human services fields of health, families and housing. She has a particular interest in society and community and especially how all Territorians can participate equally and meaningfully, particularly Aboriginal Territorians from remote and urban areas. Trish believes a key component of this is for Aboriginal Territorians to be active participants in the Territory's workforce and that the NT public sector has a responsibility and also a great opportunity to lead the way. As a local Aboriginal woman and senior government bureaucrat Trish is a strong advocate of this.

### Dr Garth Britton

Advanced Dynamics

PO Box 100

Toronto NSW 2283

**Garth** consults widely to private and public sector organisations and maintains an active research and teaching programme in organisational change and strategy, focussing particularly on the effects of intercultural interaction within and between organisations. He has 20 years experience in private sector senior management in several countries in Asia and Europe.



# Aboriginal Employment in the Northern Territory Public Sector

## Abstract

This paper discusses experience to date with a new approach to promoting Aboriginal Employment and Career development within the Northern Territory Department of Local Government and Housing, and suggests some learning that can be drawn from the work so far.

There is already significant experience with programmes to promote Aboriginal Employment by public sector organisations. Some, particularly those that are designed around roles that reflect the concerns of the communities in which potential employees live, have reported significant success. Others are seen as less successful, or have proven difficult to maintain in the face of conflicting organisational or political priorities, or an apparent lack of high-level commitment, despite sometimes aggressive attempts to link them to performance targets, backed by extensive reporting and monitoring requirements. This paper aims to contribute to that growing body of experience. The focus is on action that can be taken by a public sector employer to promote Aboriginal Employment, rather than any general systemic analysis. The approach is designed to complement rather than replace existing programmes. Rather than offering a prescription for action, the intention is to describe experience with an on-going project, as a contribution to learning and the generation of ideas.

A key underpinning of the approach is the recognition that, in the specific context of the Northern Territory, it is a strategic imperative for the public sector to improve its ability to recruit, retain and develop Aboriginal employees, if its future workforce needs are to be met. Because of this, Aboriginal Employment programmes are 'core business' rather than solely an ethical obligation. Furthermore, the programme is based on devolving action to regional and local units, in order to appropriately address the diverse conditions and concerns that exist across the Territory.

The approach consists of three broad levels of initiative, each aimed at building substantive engagement:



1. Action learning teams to identify key issues pertaining to Aboriginal employment at a local level, which encourage engagement with relevant key local constituencies;
2. The establishment of coaching and performance management capabilities that promote personal engagement between managers and staff;
3. Building cross-service networks that will enable longer-term support for Aboriginal employees as their careers develop.

In several respects the initiatives address issues or build capabilities that will benefit all employees, rather than being specifically targeted at Aboriginal employees. Furthermore, even where the focus is on Aboriginal employees, both indigenous and non-indigenous employees contribute. The overall thrust is to mobilise employees to address immediate issues, using that experience to generate learning that allows longer term issues to be addressed and at the same time build the organisational capability to do so.

Because the focus is on the strategic necessity confronting the organisation, the onus for change is on the organisation. This opens the organisation up to a number of potentially far-reaching adaptations, which affect not only expectations with regard to the quality of service delivery and the physical location of jobs, but may extend to the service offerings themselves, and which have significant implications for workplace culture.

## NT Context

In the Northern Territory it is widely recognised that, without significant improvement in recruitment, retention and development of Aboriginal employees, there will be considerable difficulty in ensuring sufficient availability of appropriately qualified and engaged employees in the coming years. It is generally accepted that the Territory cannot rely on attracting people from other states, both because of the cost of such a strategy and because the imported workforce is relatively mobile and therefore not an appropriate foundation for meeting long-term needs. Furthermore, because of demographic trends in the Territory, in particular the tendency for non-indigenous youth to leave the Territory, the development of an appropriate local workforce supply crucially depends on increasing Aboriginal peoples' participation in the workforce and ensuring that they are able to fully realise their employment potential.



The approach being developed and implemented in the Department of Local Government and Housing is predicated on responding to this strategic need, rather than being driven primarily or ostensibly by equity and diversity concerns. Coming from this perspective not only assists in raising the profile and priority of Aboriginal Employment to 'core business' of the Department, but also emphasises questions of how the Department needs to change what it is doing, rather than focussing on Aboriginal Employment as a 'problem' of Aboriginal people that the Department is in some way helping to 'fix'. It also establishes the need for genuine engagement with the key constituencies to devise ways to meet the needs both of Aboriginal people and the Department, rather than the planning and implementation of another programme imposed by Government for the good of others. Instead of being driven by experts in the area (although they may have a contribution to make at various stages), the emphasis is on establishing substantive, person-to-person links between managers, employees, community leaders and potential employees.

### **Learning through Action**

Because of the wide diversity in the social and economic context of Aboriginal communities and groups across the Territory, and the significant cultural differences between them, this focus on engagement also implies a devolved approach to promoting employment, one which allows different objectives and tactics to be developed that reflect local priorities. A devolved approach avoids the inflexibility attached to attempting to develop central understanding and responses to local issues, and shifts the emphasis from managing an internal planning process to building an outward-looking engagement with people and issues.

The Department of Local Government and Housing has addressed this need for devolution by starting 'learning-through-action' projects in each of its Regional Offices. Teams of people who are most interested in, or exposed to, the need to improve the Department's performance in employing Aboriginal people have been formed, prepared, and tasked with identifying the key measures which they believe are likely to generate progress in their specific context. These teams include, but are not necessarily exclusively made up of, Aboriginal employees. The implementation of their projects is being monitored to generate learning, both by identifying



previously unrecognised issues as they emerge, and by finding better ways to address them. The aim is to generate both short-term progress and build a platform of learning, which enables longer-term or more complex issues to be approached.

Some of the initiatives being undertaken focus on recruitment, some on improving the 'friendliness' of the Department as an employer, such as improving the office environment and ensuring proper induction processes are in place for new employees (not just Aboriginal people). Other types of issues being addressed involve the investigation of perceived blockages within the employment policies of the Department, which might lead to broader discussions. By establishing the process as one driven by staff rather than imposed on them, established workplace cultures can be challenged and a broader context of change in attitudes and behaviours encouraged. Moreover, because the teams involved have selected the issues of most importance to themselves, there is an inherent commitment to keeping the initiatives going, and less tendency for activity to peter out.

In this way, a continuously accelerating engagement with key local constituencies and problems is encouraged, one which is driven by local concerns and needs, rather than motivated by pressure from a central office. Because of this, however, it is important that the leadership of the local unit recognises and accepts their key role in driving the programme. A side benefit is that running such teams can be expected to build the capability of both participants and the organisational unit, and favour a more active, forward-looking style within the unit.

## Implications

It is important to note that the strategy adopted by the Department opens it up to the possibility of needing to change the way it does business.

For example, in Alice Springs, the team looking at the issues surrounding the development of Aboriginal employment concluded that the major contribution that could be made would be to improve the quality of service delivery across the Department's core business. It was felt that the way the Department had configured its client interface could be better adapted to the needs of its main client groups, the majority of whom are Indigenous people, and that this would



improve both the image of the Department and its attractiveness to potential employees. A range of initiatives has been developed to address these issues.

However, the implications for service delivery are potentially much more far-reaching. Substantive engagement with local communities can be expected to build better understanding of the specific needs of each community, but also to build better understanding of the capability existing within each community. This not only opens up the possibility of utilising the skills of local people in the delivery of services (with obvious employment implications), but also suggests that the nature of the service offering itself may need to be opened up to examination.

There is also an emerging recognition that in some cases the location of jobs in a just a few major regional centres both inhibits the Department's ability to attract people, and impacts on the services it is able to deliver. There are indications that over time this will lead to the development of more decentralised locations for the Department, which will both better address service needs, and create real employment opportunities in remote communities.

Whilst the local level has been the primary focus of the DLGH approach, a key challenge has been the establishment of appropriate linkages between the activities in the various regions. Effectively establishing such linkages could be expected to cross-fertilise innovation and spread the benefits of experience across the Department, and also to encourage positive perceptions (both internal and external) of the Department's work in this area. Work is on-going to find the best way to connect the work of the regions.

## Engaging the Employee

Large, modern organisations dispose of a wide range of interconnected systems to manage the workforce. These are often highly formalised and in many cases technology-driven. For all their obvious benefits, such systems can be misapplied and contribute to a lack of personal engagement between managers and staff. The tendency to replace face-to-face conversation with completion of forms (particularly on-line), or delegate contact to specialist HR resources is understandable in high pressure environments, but it can have significant consequences in terms of developing sensitivity to emerging issues or employee concerns.



Countering such 'depersonalisation' arguably offers significant potential to generate better experience of work and motivation for all employees. However, this may be even more the case for some Aboriginal employees, who may not benefit from the same societal and institutional supports connecting them to the workplace as their non-indigenous counterparts, and who may feel alienated from the organisation from the beginning.

The DLGH programme is exploring the possibility of improving the quality of management-employee engagement by establishing the practice of coaching as an organisational capability, available to all employees. Different models are being tried. An initial pilot with the natural team of one region failed because it proved too difficult for that team to focus on building their coaching capability while maintaining focus on their day-to-day priorities. An alternative is now being developed, to establish a centre of coaching capability in each Regional site, initially around a single individual who would be available and supported to help build capability across the site.

The challenges of prioritising such engagement between managers and staff should not be underestimated. In addition to the potential conflicts that may arise between operational priorities and such 'softer' engagement, emphasising personal contact makes significant demands on managers, both at a personal and a professional level. The necessary skills are not often taught in formal management education, and may have been little exercised in practice even where they do exist. Moreover, any discomfort in intercultural interaction on the part of either manager or employee is likely to be exacerbated in this context. For this reason, on-going support is likely to be required for some time, in addition to thorough initial preparation for managers and staff involved.



## Developing Managers

Any long-term increase in the representativeness of employment profiles within the Department will demand a significant increase over time in the numbers of Aboriginal people in higher levels of management. It is possible to identify several interconnected issues that need to be addressed in order to support this development, and there are undoubtedly a number of others that will emerge over time.

While the provision of support for skill development and obtention of educational qualifications is an essential element of any development programme (and not just for Aboriginal employees) it is only a part of the answer. Some of the major barriers to performance at higher levels of management stem not from lack of technical competency or skills base, but from a lack of the experience or personal competency required to lead at the appropriate level. It is, indeed, possible that placing too much emphasis on formal management training, without building confidence and judgment through real-world experience can produce behaviours that impede performance at high levels. The investment already described by DLGH in building the quality of management-employee engagement may assist employees in improving the quality of learning they take from their experience, since it is quite clear that guidance and support by more experienced managers is vital to the development of younger ones.

However, there is also a very clear indication that the improvement of performance feedback both within the Department and more broadly would benefit employees and organisations alike. Performance conversations are always sensitive, but it is particularly important to bear in mind the intercultural context in which mentoring and performance feedback take place. There may be, for instance, gender and seniority issues, as well as different understandings of appropriate language, that demand particular knowledge or care. The suggestion is that the organisation as a whole will need to become much more adept at understanding how to manage, and perhaps even benefit from, the cultural diversity which already exists, and which will only grow as the workforce moves towards better representation of the Territory demographic. The necessary sensitivity is much more than cultural familiarisation: it must be based on the development of broader openness and acceptance of different cultural perspectives and approaches. Building such intercultural capability is likely to become a key leadership preoccupation.



## Supporting Careers

Measures to increase Aboriginal employment must obviously aim not only at entry or middle level positions. Over time, it is essential that there be an appropriate representation of Aboriginal people at senior levels as well. In this context, it is particularly important to note that the increasing elected representation of Aboriginal people in the Territory, including at Cabinet level, has not translated into a similar increase in numbers of Aboriginal people in Ministerial offices or at senior levels of the Public service.

This lack of Aboriginal employees at senior levels in the NTPS means that there is a paucity of aspirational role models for existing and potential Aboriginal employees. Furthermore, it is a concern for the development of Aboriginal managers over the medium- and long-term. If employees (Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal) are to develop the extensive repertoire of personal competency, judgement and confidence required to perform at high levels in a modern organisation, it is likely that they will need to build their experience over a number of positions, and have some expectation that their continued acceptance of larger challenges will lead to attractive future roles. This means that most successful careers will involve several organisations, and benefit from significant support and guidance from more senior managers who have already experienced and successfully negotiated the various challenges.

In the public sector context this may mean the establishment of semi-formal links and opportunities for engagement between people at various levels, providing a sort of social context in which managers can develop. Such networks clearly exist for non-indigenous employees; however, even if they are not intentionally closed to Aboriginal employees, they are unlikely, at the current stage of development, to provide the resources necessary to understand the specific challenges faced by young Aboriginal managers. Hence, building quality links between Aboriginal employees across the sector, links which can be maintained over the length of a career, and networks which can replenish themselves over the long term, is likely to be vital to ensuring appropriate support mechanisms for the development of Aboriginal employees. The small numbers of Aboriginal people at a senior level represents a clear obstacle to the development of such networks, which must be met both by active recruitment into higher level



positions, and by consciously encouraging the networking and mentoring roles of those senior executives who do currently exist.

As the process of engagement proceeds, it is clear that new ways will have to be found to better value and give voice to cultural knowledge, both that of employees and of people with whom the Department interacts. One of the greatest barriers to surfacing and understanding such knowledge, once ways to engage are properly established, is the difficulty presented by language barriers. DLGH is particularly conscious of this issue, because one of its units is a thriving Aboriginal Interpreter Service. On the one hand, the AIS is one of the most significant employers of Aboriginal people in the Territory, with some 300 active casual interpreters on its books, performing some 7000 interpreting jobs in the last year; on the other, interpreting services are increasingly becoming recognised as a fundamental enabler of intercultural interaction between public or private sector organisations and Aboriginal communities. Professional interpreting not only improves the substance of communication, though: it supports a better recognition of, and respect for, the culture of both speakers. Hence, a key challenge for the Aboriginal Employment work in the Department is to create linkages with the operations of the Interpreter Service, enabling intercultural learning and insight. Furthermore, supporting the growth of the Interpreter Service to more fully meet the potential demand for Interpreting Services has truly transformational possibilities for Territory society.

## Emphasising Action

Rather than presenting a prescription or advocating a particular approach to developing Aboriginal Employment to the exclusion of others, this paper aims to provide some glimpses into the lessons learnt from the work which is on-going in DLGH. The 'learning-through-action' approach, by its very nature, focuses more on the opening up of conversations and sharing of experience than the development of authoritative models for replication. It favours enabling action and generating practical innovation. Moreover, perhaps because it does not frame its activity in terms of milestones fixed in advance, it is not as prone to one of the more frequent critiques made of more traditional approaches – that they can fall into a 'fund and abandon' trap, where attention lapses as soon as the project is 'finished' and goals 'achieved'.



Early progress encourages belief in the possibility of dealing with the issues, and so motivates attacking the bigger questions; also, within an action learning framework, it provides necessary learning that enables those bigger issues to be approached. Implicit in the approach being adopted in DLGH is the recognition that this is a long-term effort, which will produce both benefits and obstacles that are unforeseeable in the present. Hence, although this is not a justification for failing to establish any measurement mechanisms or success criteria, the focus is on enabling progress and building on it, and integrating the effort into the day-to-day management of the Department.

Beyond the challenges inherent in an ambitious project like this, however, is the deeper issue of what sort of workplace culture will develop as the organisation becomes a truly engaged at the local level, and starts to build towards a workforce demographic that properly reflects the diversity of the Territory. It is possible to understand the issue in terms of an inevitable conflict between allowing diversity within the workplace, while maintaining integration across the organisation. This sort of formulation, however, suggests compromise or 'balance' as a likely resolution, and makes its maintenance a central issue for management over the long term. This appears somewhat negative. An alternative formulation of the issue might be how to rise to the challenge of establishing a workplace culture that embraces diversity and fully reflects the unique nature of the Territory, its people and their aspirations, making this a unifying rather than dividing force. This represents probably the main leadership challenge underlying the promotion of Aboriginal Employment over the coming years.

