

Building successful organisations via culturally grounded governance

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I am of Norwegian, German & Scottish descent, my mother's family were immigrants in the 1800's and my father's family, good convict stock. I was born in Awabakal country, Newcastle, and moved to Arrernte Country, Alice Springs, in 1996 with a surreal feeling of having arrived home to a place I had only ever been to in my imagination.

I wish to share with you, from my non-Aboriginal public servant perspective, stories relating to the decision making processes that have evolved between the Northern Territory Government and Central Arrernte amereke-artweye, the senior people who speak for Mparntwe (the Country on which Alice Springs is built).

In 1991 the Northern Territory Government proposed the idea of building a significant tourism facility in Alice Springs. The project leader, Dr Ken Johnson, sought to develop a reciprocal partnership with amereke-artweye to seek their permission and involvement from the beginning of the planning process. The Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority assisted to identify and introduce the appropriate individuals. 'At this time amereke-artweye and the Conservation Commission (NT Government project team) did not know each other well and in fact in, some respects, there was a reasonable level of distrust. As a consequence there was a very important initial process of developing understanding, respect and trust among one another' K Johnson, pers. comm 2005. Ken and his team listened more than they spoke and sought to understand before they sought to be understood. 'A group of (key) people were taken to the Territory Wildlife Park, near Darwin, to get a minds eye of what the Desert Park development would mean. This included looking into service pits to understand that trenches would be dug to carry power and water, causing appreciable ground disturbance' K Johnson, pers. comm. 2011. An agreed position was reached and amereke-artweye and the project team selected a 50 hectare site, in which to build the facility. This area avoided sacred sites where possible, and ensured that those within the boundaries were protected to the satisfaction of amereke-artweye. The site enabled stories to be told of the inextricably linked lives of desert plants, animals, people and landscapes.

Nestled in the foothills of the MacDonnell Ranges, under the protection of Akngwelye (a creation spirit ancestor) we invite our visitors to see the desert through new eyes as we share the stories of the plants, animals, people and landscapes of desert Australia.

The interpretation of the human aspects of an environment on powerful traditional Country brings with it a complexity of issues. Accuracy and appropriateness are paramount. It is important for us to maintain our corporate knowledge of basic Arrernte kinship, genealogy of the key families, connection to country and basic conversational Arrernte. In essence, Arrernte life has always revolved around family and social relationships. The Arrernte kinship system is an ancient and very effective governance system. There are eight skin names¹: Penangke, Perrurle, Kemarre, Peltharre, Kngwarraye, Angale, Ampetyane and Pengarte. This name describes your rights, your responsibilities to each other and to your amere (your country / home). Each piece of land has amereke-artweye (decision makers) and kwertengerle (caretakers). Kngwarraye and Peltharre are the Central Arrernte Amereke-artweye of Mparntwe, and Anale and Ampetyane are the Kwertengwerle. The country neighbouring Mparntwe is Ilpme and Anale and Ampetyane are the Amereke-artweye for Ilpme and Kngwarraye-Peltharre can be Kwertengerle of Ilpme. In essence, you are the caretaker of your neighbour's land, an important lesson in sustainability for all of us.

Amereke-artweye: Howard, Hilda, Bob, Doris, Frankie, Thomas and Elaine and kwertengwerle: Rosie & Gus have been our highly respected partners and mentors over the past 19 years. Sadly in that time we have lost all but two of them. Their knowledge, perspectives and ideas have been, and continue to be, combined with the perspectives of the wider Aboriginal community to enable us to present cultural aspects of Australian desert landscapes.

It has been part of our workplace culture from day one that amereke-artweye are key decision makers in our planning and development. Bob once said to the current Director of the Park 'I don't want to know the day to day details, how you run the business is your business, just talk to me about the big stuff' B Stuart pers. comm. 2008. This culture grew, not out of a legal obligation, but from the belief that Aboriginal people have the right to interpret their culture in their way.

It has been a very useful exercise to retrospectively analyse these relationships and processes within the context of governance principles and identify our gaps. Reconciliation Australia² defines governance as "being about people; how they organise themselves as a group to manage their own affairs and achieve the things that matter to them." They go on to say that "Governance is made up of many different, but equally important elements. These all need to work well together if a group or organisation are going to be effective. Some of the key parts of governance are: your people, your processes, your strategies, your resources and your culture. Each of these different parts have to work together in order to create strong effective and legitimate governance."

I have adapted this table from Reconciliation Australia's online Governance Toolkit.

¹ <http://www.alicespringsdesertpark.com.au/kids/culture/relationships.shtml>

² <http://www.reconciliation.org.au/governance/home>

Our people (who does it)	Our processes (how we do it)	Our strategies (what we do)	Our resources (what we need)	Our culture (way we do it)
<p>Apmereke-artweye, kwertengwerle & their families</p> <p>Other cultural advisors / elders</p> <p>ASDP Staff</p>	<p>Our rules / behaviour</p> <p>Aboriginal & non-Aboriginal laws</p> <p>Traditional & Government decision making</p> <p>Staff & apmerek-artweye roles</p>	<p>Master Plan, Interpretive Plan & Program, Business Plan & Annual Plan, Cross Cultural Competence Training Program & Project Plans all involve apmerek-artweye</p> <p>Future Reconciliation Action Plan</p> <p>Future Succession Plan</p>	<p>Physical: The Park & technology</p> <p>Natural: landscape, endemic plant and animal collection</p> <p>Cultural: knowledge</p> <p>Social: Visitors & partners</p> <p>Funding: CSO</p>	<p>Arrernte Worldview & ASDP values</p>

Our people

Apmereke-artweye and kwertengwerle are primary partners. The Park is a source of pride for them and their families. One of my favourite memories of Thomas was when I introduced him to one of our new Guides; he shook her hand gently and said 'it is very good to have you working for me' T Stevens pers. comm. 2005.

We work closely with cultural advisors and elders from other families and language groups particularly in the areas of language and traditional ecological knowledge.

The Desert Park staff is a passionate and highly skilled team with a diversity of skills and knowledge. Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Western Scientific Knowledge are given equal status. We have a culture of inclusion and a corporate commitment to improving the attraction, retention and growth of our Aboriginal workforce. Of the 50 Desert Park Staff, ten identify as Aboriginal. Our goal is to increase this percentage from 20% to 25% by 2012 and 30% by 2020 to more closely reflect our local demographic. My career ambition is to see a local Aboriginal person appointed to Director of the Desert Park within the next ten years.

Our processes

In relation to power, authority and rules Reconciliation Australia suggest that 'Governance rules should specify:

- how power is shared,
- who has the authority to make the important decisions,
- how decisions should be enforced and
- how the people who make decisions are accountable.

They might be written rules in documents such as constitutions, bylaws, policies, regulations, business and strategic plans, and company rules. Or they might be unwritten rules that exist in traditions, ways of behaving and treating each other (codes of conduct), and the values people live by' Reconciliation Australia Governance Toolkit.

Our internal rules / behaviour for working cross-culturally is: to have regular formal and informal meetings which enable us to spend time developing relationships and engaging in meaningful ongoing communication in order to build mutual trust; to communicate by the principles of good manners, common decency, mutual respect, acceptance and good humour; to maintain flexibility and allow the time necessary for the family to reach consensus with regard to any decision making; to use plain English and interpreters when necessary, to listen and watch more than we speak, to pay attendees for their time and to distribute notes of the meetings to attendees soon after the meeting for them to check accuracy, provide feedback and share with extended family.

We have made many mistakes over the years but have developed a high enough level of trust with family members for them to tell us when we do and explain why.

In 2003 Galawarruy Yunupingu said, 'the challenge is to develop new governance models which are based on the best of the Aboriginal domain and tools from the non-Aboriginal domain. This would involve marrying Aboriginal law and tradition with non-Aboriginal ways'. Yunupingu 2003

Australia supports the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples³. Of particular relevance to the Alice Springs Desert Park is:

- Article 16 Public Information, states that 'Indigenous Peoples have the right to the dignity and diversity of their cultures, traditions, histories and aspirations which shall be appropriately reflected in education and public information'

Nthakenhe apmere arntarnte-areme are the Arrernte rules for living. Eastern Arrernte Elder MK Turner's explanation of this in English is that 'The ancestor spirits still hold the Land and its people in their hands. Land kinship and people hold country together and the elders hold the sacredness of the land, people and animals.' Turner 2005

The Desert Park respects Arrernte Law. In the early years of the Park our Invertebrate Keeper was keen to set up a Honey Ant colony. I knew Rosie had some cultural responsibility for Yerrampe (Honey Ants) as I had seen her painting them on a visit to her home; the next time we were in the car together I asked her about the possibility of keeping a colony of Honey Ants in 'captivity'. There was a long silence which by then was something I was becoming a little less uncomfortable with. I knew it had been a big question and after the silence she spoke very clearly, in her best Queen's English, 'you know that question you just asked me about Yerrampe? That would not be a good thing to do' R Ferber pers.comm. 1999. This was followed by another long silence, then she said 'that could start a war' R Ferber pers.comm 1999 and that was the end of the conversation. I don't really know, and it is none of my business, but I interpret 'war' to be in the realm of the Altyerre, the creation

³ Australian Human Rights Commission www.humanrights.gov.au

ancestors. It has become very clear to me over the years that if, as an apmerek-artweye or kwertengerle, you do not do all you can to protect the plants, animals, landscapes or people you are responsible for, very bad things happen to you and your family. When I reported Rosie's response to the Director of the Desert Park at the time, he made it very clear to all staff that we would respect this and would never keep a Honey Ant colony. This information has been enshrined in our animal record keeping system to ensure this knowledge is passed on.

We discovered that we didn't actually need a Honey Ant colony to tell great Honey Ant stories. The best stories are those told from first hand experience. Our Guides regularly go Honey Ant collecting with cultural advisors and these experiences provide plenty of material for stories, such as looking for signs, taking care when digging, doing a hard mornings work, the excitement of finding the Honey Ant chamber deep underground, the manners associated with sharing and the delight of eating a Honey Ant.

Working with apmerek-artweye and kwertengwerle allows holistic dual stewardship: traditional decision making and Government decision making working together to protect our natural and cultural assets. We currently have a Chief Executive, Executive Director and Director who are comfortable with this arrangement but that dynamic could change rapidly at any time. We have enshrined this arrangement in our strategic plans, within our values statement and Job Descriptions to safeguard it from any future government executives who may want to be less inclusive in their decision making.

In relation to individual roles and responsibilities: all Northern Territory Government Job Descriptions now have a selection criterion that says 'Ability to communicate effectively with people from other cultures' and in addition to this 30% of the Desert Park job descriptions also have specific mention of 'an ability to work with the Aboriginal people who are traditionally responsible for the land on which the Park is built.' Our Botany Team is responsible for growing and looking after the endemic plant collection and managing introduced plant species, our Zoology Team is responsible for breeding, displaying and caring for the native animal collection and controlling introduced animals on the site and our Guides are responsible for sharing the stories of the plants, animals, people and landscapes of desert Australia.

'The primary responsibility of apmerek-artweye is to protect cultural sites and their stories' Stuart 2010.

It is our collective responsibility to share what we are learning with others.

Our strategies

The original Desert Park Master plan and Interpretive Plan were developed in partnership with apmerek-artweye and kwertengwerle and they provide ongoing advice, guidance, permission and training with regard to 'face to face' cultural interpretive programs.

The Business Plan and Annual Plan include targets associated with continued involvement with amereke-artweye and kwertengwerle.

We recently introduced an ongoing monthly cultural fitness training program for all staff to immerse them in ongoing first hand experiences relating to desert cultures and inclusiveness.

My current project is to work with community partners to redevelop an existing building into a vibrant culture centre. The project plan evolved out of discussions with amereke-artweye, kwertengwerle and their families, Desert Park staff and from potential community partners. The centre will be an 'inter-cultural and intra-cultural social learning space' that will attract more visitors to the Desert Park, immerse these visitors in desert Aboriginal worldviews and leave them moved, connected and informed. The centre will promote an appreciation of the fundamental role elders play in the transmission of culture and values from one generation to another and will rely upon the essential contributions made by our elders in all phases of development. The centre will provide a safe, engaging and nurturing space for our youth to develop skills, connections, pride, identity and self esteem. Cultural activities will be delivered by partners in an atmosphere of cooperation and collaboration recognising that sharing is the basis for cultural survival.

This project hails the next leg of our journey into the realm of Aboriginal economic development. In the short term we will seek external grants and sponsorship and utilise a flexible fee for service user pay business model to determine the viability of cultural activities. In the long term, for those partners interested in developing small tourism businesses, we will seek advice from Indigenous Business Australia and guidance from the Central Aboriginal Experience. This tourism business hub provides business mentoring and has a business centre where services and 'real-life' business skills development are provided including website and brochure development and production, accounting and financial services.

Writing this paper has reminded me of the need to facilitate the development of a Reconciliation Action Plan to explore "how reconciliation can advance our organisational objectives" Reconciliation Australia 2005-2009⁴.

It has also reminded me to begin a conversation with amere-artweye and kwertengwerle about Succession Planning to ensure the Park is clear about who the next generation of Central Arrernte decision makers and caretakers are.

Our resources

The Alice Springs Desert Park, its infrastructure, and technology make up our physical resources. Our natural assets are the physical landscape and the endemic plant and animal collections. Our cultural resources include desert Aboriginal people, their collective knowledge of the landscape and its sites, stories, spirits, language,

⁴ <http://www.reconciliation.org.au/home/reconciliation-action-plans/what-is-a-rap->

kinship, laws and customs. Our social capital is our 80, 000 visitors pa, 2500 Territorian Pass Holders, Friends of the Desert Park, volunteers and strategic partners. We collaborate with partners from a variety of sectors including: Government, business, NGO, tourism, research, media, sustainability, arts, education, employment & training. We are largely funded by the Northern Territory Government via a Community Service Obligation grant.

Our culture

In the Arrernte worldview desert plants, animals, people and landscapes are inextricably linked. Eastern Arrernte Elder, MK Turner explains in her latest book: *Iwenhe Tyerrtye – what it means to be an Aboriginal person* “We are part of the Land. The Land is us. We are the Land.” Turner 2009 ‘The land gives you everything you need so it is your responsibility to look after it.’ Turner 2006

The Alice Springs Desert Park has embraced this worldview in our design, presentation and philosophy. “We want visitors to leave the Park with an increased desire and ability to Respect, Enjoy and Look After the Australian desert environment and its inhabitants. These three key values underpin everything that we do at the Park. We aim to Respect, Enjoy and Look After:

- Our local environment
- Our global environment
- Our work mates
- Our Park
- Our community
- Our visitors
- Our business partners”⁵

This melding of traditional and government values is our shared vision and collective culture.

Communities are built by people and, like any good relationship they are built on years of trust, respect for each other and shared experiences. The culturally grounded governance systems and processes that have evolved between the Northern Territory Government at the Alice Springs Desert Park and Central Arrernte *apmereke-artweye* and *kwertengwerle* provide us with a resilient foundation to progress our business and our community in these uncertain times.

⁵ <http://www.alicespringsdesertpark.com.au/about/values.shtml>

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