

Aboriginal employment models that increase access and sustainability: A framework for success

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We are all composed of the same matter as the brightest stars in the galaxy. 'We share one sun and one moon and one whole land mass that is only separated by water' *Lechleitner 2010*. We live on all six of our planet's diverse land masses in a plethora of urban and natural habitats and speak around 7000 languages *Paul, 2009*. Respecting, nurturing and harnessing this collective knowledge and wisdom is essential for the achievement of a sustainable and healthy world.

My home, Alice Springs, has been called many contradictory names over the years: the dead heart, the living heart, the red centre, the dead centre, the murder capital, solar city and potential 'U- mine' town. The colonisers called it Stuart from 1880-1932 but for millennia this very special place has been called Mparntwe, the home of the Central Arrernte people.

In the Arrernte worldview desert plants, animals, people and landscapes are inextricably linked. "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*

Arrernte life has always revolved around family and social relationships. In order for us to build positive relationships with Arrernte families it has been essential to have some understanding of this highly structured system. There are eight [Arrernte skin names](#): Penangke, Perrurle, Kemarre, Peltharre, Kngwarraye, Angale, Ampetyane and Pengarte. This name describes your rights, your responsibilities to each other and to your apmere (your country / home). Each piece of land has Apmereke-artweye (decision makers) and Kwertengwerle (caretakers). 'Apmere' means country / home, and 'artweye' means 'belonging to'. The English translation of apmerek-artweye is 'Traditional Owner' and this is an, all too common, example of how easily meaning can be lost between languages 'when the people explaining and the people listening do not share the same language' *Stuart 2010*. Language is not just words; it is a state of consciousness. There is a big difference between the concepts of 'owning country' and 'belonging to country'. Even belonging to country probably does not convey the extent of connection (oneness) and passion that apmerek-artweye have. Kngwarraye and Peltharre are the Central Arrernte Apmerek-artweye of Mparntwe, and Anale and Ampetyane are the Kwertengerle. The country neighbouring Mparntwe is Ilpme and Anale and Ampetyane are the Apmerek-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.

When the Northern Territory Government proposed the idea of building a tourism facility in Alice Springs the project leaders sought to develop a reciprocal partnership with the central Arrernte Apmerek-artweye to seek their permission and involvement. The project leaders listened more than they spoke and sought to understand before they sought to be understood. An agreed position was reached and Apmerek-artweye and Desert Park staff selected a 50 hectare site, away from the most powerful sacred sites, to build the facility in which the stories are 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 (the Thylacine spirit) 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 the environment brings with it a complexity of issues. Accuracy and appropriateness are paramount. A group of eight Apmereke-artweye and three Kwertengerle have been our highly respected partners and mentors over the past 14 years. Sadly in that time we have lost all but two. Where appropriate, those duties have passed to their next generation.

Ongoing job opportunities for family have always been a high priority for Apmereke-artweye and Kwertengerle. In 2006 we established an 'Adopt a School'¹ program with a local school (that Rosie's grandchildren attend) to show the students that there are real opportunities for them to work at the Alice Springs Desert Park if that is what they choose. Adopt a School is a partnership to engage year seven students in learning about careers, to develop employment skills and empower young people to want to join the workforce.

Aboriginal people represent approximately 30% of the Central Australian population. In the short term we aim to increase our local Aboriginal employees from 20% to 25% by 2012 and 30% by 2020 to represent our local community demographics.

In the early days of planning Apmereke-artweye made it clear that although the Park is built on Central Arrernte Country, they wanted to ensure that visitors left the Park understanding that desert Australia is a nation of Aboriginal Cultures and were supportive of individuals from other language groups working at the Park. One year before the Park was due to open, we sought and secured the designation of four (of the then six) Guide jobs for Central Australian Aboriginal people only. Three of the four young people completed a Certificate III Tourism (Guiding) and were directly appointed as qualified Guides, ready for the Park's opening in March 1997. In the 14 years since then we have had a 71% completion rate for our Guide Apprentices, 80% of those who completed were directly appointed and 72% of those who completed are still employed in the Northern Territory.

One thing that became very obvious to us was that a lot of energy was required in the first few months of employing apprentices to develop their self esteem and work ethics.

At the end of 2009 we enlisted the support of eight government and eight non-government partners to pilot a pre-apprentice training program. This four week, part time program was designed to develop job readiness and promote retention. Key focus areas were: life skills and work readiness, workplace and job familiarisation, audio-visual technology skills, building self esteem and connecting or reconnecting with culture.

Training coincided with our 2010 intake of apprentices and we had three positions available: a one year guide apprenticeship, a three year horticulturist apprenticeship and a three year zoo keeper apprenticeship. We enlisted the help of one of the Department of Education and Training's² English as a Second Language (ESL) specialists to help us with the wording for promotional posters emailed through local networks and placed in areas where young people gather. From the twenty seven applications we received we short listed seven to participate in the program for the four weeks leading up to their interviews. Six of the participants were of Arrernte descent and one of Pitjantjatjara descent, two participants were unemployed and the other five were recent year 12 graduates (4/5 of whom had been involved in the Clontarf Football

¹ http://www.dest.gov.au/ministers/nelson/april_04/nsss_fact4.pdf

² <http://www.det.nt.gov.au/>

Academy³). Three participants lived in town camps, two in mainstream housing and two on their homelands, 20 kilometers west of Alice Springs.

Group Training NT⁴ delivered the first training session, workplace safety. Five of participants rated this session as 'OK' and two as 'crap'. When asked to qualify their response they both explained that they had been involved in multiple workplace safety sessions, an all too common complaint from the most 'trained and studied group of people in Australia' *Pearson 2010*.

Workplace and job familiarisation involved a tour of the behind the scenes areas of botany, zoology and guides, a self guided tour of the park to gain an insight into the visitor experience then work placements in the area/s of interest. Six rated this element as 'excellent' and one as 'OK'.

We sought the assistance of a local film maker to do two half day sessions with the group; one on operating a video camera and one on downloading and editing, so that we could make a digital story of the camp. Five of participants rated this as 'excellent' and two as 'OK'

The Traditional Credit Union⁵ facilitated a fun and interactive session on Money Matters, including budgeting, prioritising, saving, minimising account fees and setting up two bank accounts (one to share with family and one for savings). Participants were given uniforms and I did an ironing demonstration on day one that obviously paid off as all participants were wrinkle free every day. We had open and frank discussions about employer expectations, school to work transition and preparing for an interview. We used our allocated budget to plan and purchase groceries for four meals for fifteen people for the two day camp. 100% of participants rated the life skills elements as 'excellent.'

A positive self esteem involves having: a strong sense of self, identity and connection (to place, family, friends and community); a positive self-image; pride in yourself and your achievements, the confidence to turn off negative self-talk and a sense of responsibility. 'A positive self esteem builds the psychological resilience to tackle challenges'. *Cooley 2010* 'When you know who you are you can do anything, pride leads to confidence which leads to opportunity' *Widders 2010*

As a bit of an ice breaker on day one, we played pipe-eneye ('go fish') in central Arrernte. Initially all of the participants were apure (embarrassed) but it did not take long for them to feel safe enough to give it a go and have some fun. We had a few games each day and mostly with no prompting from me

The Director of the Northern Territory Archives⁶ spent a morning with the group showing them how to plan and conduct each others oral histories and we complimented this session with a few episodes of 'Who do you think you are?'. We discovered that everyone has a story, most of us have unpleasant chapters in those stories and the good bits and the bad bits are what makes us, us.

'Identity is paramount to self esteem' *Widders 2010*. Training activities designed to nurture a strong identity involved taking a day trip around Alice Springs. We visited the Strehlow Research Centre⁷. This centre is responsible for caring for, and facilitating culturally appropriate access to, Anthropologist Professor T.G.H. Strehlow's collection of central Australian ethnographic objects

³ <http://www.clontarffootball.com/>

⁴ <http://www.gtnt.com.au/>

⁵ <http://www.tcu.com.au/>

⁶ <http://www.nt.gov.au/nreta/ntas/>

⁷ <http://www.nt.gov.au/nreta/museums/strehlow/>

and archival materials. We found all of the Arrernte descended participants' family trees and two of the girls could trace their family back to their great-great-great-great grandmother who lived in Mparntwe in the 1700's, some 150 years or so prior to the area's colonisation. We navigated around the Arrernte and Pitjantjatjara photographic databases at the Alice Springs Library⁸ and the curator of Araluen Art Gallery⁹ took us on a journey through the Central Australian Aboriginal Gallery from traditional ground paintings used by the participants' ancestors as teaching tools, to the contact period art to modern art on canvas, silk and ceramic.

Akelye means 'learning', but you need to be careful when using this word in a sentence because it can also mean 'wise'. Akelye Camp involved two Arrernte elders, one Arrernte mentor, three Desert Park Aboriginal Apprentices, the seven participants, three children and myself as the facilitator. The aim of the two days was to connect or re-connect participants to their elders, heritage and country. Eastern Arrernte elder MK Turner OAM talked us through her 'Everything comes from the Land' poster *Turner 2005* and used local plant and animal flash cards to draw out some of her insightful and animated stories about particular species. Central Arrernte elder and retired Desert Park Guide, John Spencer, shared stories about Arrernte tools and medicine and talked to us about respect. Men's Health Worker and ex Desert Park Guide Charles Hogens took us on an early morning hike to the top of the range and talked to us about motivation, pride and self-respect. We cooked kangaroo tails in the fire and slept under the stars and despite the 46 degree temperature in the shade during the day all of the participants rated this camp as 'excellent'.

The outcome of the pre-apprentice training pilot were that three of the seven participants were employed into the apprentice vacancies, one was later employed as a year 13 school based apprentice under a Northern Territory disability support program, one has been employed by another government agency and the other two will be notified when suitable vacancies arise. From this pilot we have created a highly adaptable model to share.

There have been many things we have learnt and continue to learn that we believe contribute to the ongoing success of our Aboriginal Employment program and they are presented here as 'tips':

We started by developing positive relationships with our local Aboriginal communities. At this year's Indigenous Forces at Work Conference¹⁰ in Alice Springs Rhoda Roberts recounted something her father, the late great Frank Roberts Junior (who amongst other things, started the Koori Mail) said to her when she was a girl: 'daughter you have two eyes, two ears and one mouth, so make sure those eyes and ears are always doing double time to that mouth.' There is a big lesson there for all of us, listening more than we speak is the most important ingredient for developing any relationship.

We prepared our workplace. We:

- gained support at all levels by promoting Aboriginal Employment as core business
- invested in self-awareness & anti-discrimination training
- helped the team understand the bigger picture
- managed perceptions – particularly in relation to equity & equality
- provided mentoring support
- developed cultural awareness, and then developed cultural competence, and now we maintain cultural fitness

⁸ <http://www.alicesprings.nt.gov.au/library>

⁹ <http://www.nt.gov.au/nreta/arts/ascp/araluen/>

¹⁰ <http://www.jaitn.com.au/events/2010/06/indigenous-forces-work-conference>

We set an employment goal

We chose our leaders carefully: empathetic people people are more likely to:

- foster relationship style management
- understand the school to work transition
- help others overcome shame
- understand and build self esteem
- build trust
- develop work ethics and life skills
- create an inclusive workplace
- manage culture & work culture

We have been creative with recruitment. We:

- write plain English Job Descriptions
- avoid advertised during times when cultural practices might inhibit applicant interest
- advertise through local Aboriginal media
- promote via networks, families and posters in places our target audience frequent
- let people know that when written skills are not a key criterion for the job, applicants can apply verbally if preferred
- decide that if we really need to interview, we try to have that interview outside, we use scenarios, we go for a walk and give the applicant questions prior to the interview
- provide clear feedback to all applicants on how they might improve their chances next time

We have creates employment flexibility:

- casual, temporary, job sharing opportunities
- we find ways to allow leave for sorry business as it is a cultural imperative (perhaps time In lieu)
- we have made the system work for our business and staff needs

We mapped career paths in our organisation so that applicants can visually see what steps they need to take to optimise their chances. Alice Springs' future workforce lies in our Aboriginal youth as they are the growth section of our population.

We set clear goals and high expectations. We:

- make sure staff know what is expected
- provide a structured daily work program at first
- find out what individuals are good at
- set achievable tasks
- set high (but realistic & incremental) expectations

At this year's Garma Festival Noel Pearson spoke about a radical shift that is required. He said that 'success in education is essential to Aboriginal people rising up; we need to equip our youth to be fully excellent in both worlds; they must become experts in both their's and mainstream cultures.....we need to be relentless in the pursuit of excellence along both axes.'

We build confidence and skills: *'do it with us not for us' Widders 2010*

We give regular formal and informal feedback

We have tried new things, expecting to make mistakes and we have learned together

We actively develop careers. We:

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- ensure there is a job at the time of qualification or assist the individual to get a job elsewhere when we take on an apprentice
- visually map where individuals are at and where they want to get to so they can see the steps they need to take to develop their skills, attitudes and knowledge

We deal with challenges promptly and inclusively. We listen before we speak so that we can try to understand the situation before we seek to have our perspective understood.

We have aimed for a critical mass. We have found that:

- multiple positions are essential for long term success, as it reduces isolation and provides mentors
- it is vital to create a family atmosphere & make family feel welcome
- gender balance can be important

The Alice Springs Desert Park reports on a quadruple bottom line. Our Aboriginal Employment program:

Delivers human outcomes, by

- building self esteem
- providing opportunities to share and relearn culture
- being rewarding and fun
- growing role models
- providing people with choices

Delivers social outcomes by:

- improving family and community self esteem
- creating a more diverse workplace
- promoting social justice and reconciliation
- addressing the skills shortage
- setting a positive example

Delivers environmental outcomes by enabling joint stewardship of country and economic outcomes by reducing the costs associated with staff turn over.

What's next for the Alice Springs Desert Park?

- Cultural fitness. Understanding and recognising that white advantage exists is the first step in correcting the power imbalances of dominant cultural thinking over indigenous thinking. Cultural competency is described as "The ability to identify and challenge one's own cultural assumptions, one's values and beliefs. It is about developing empathy and connected knowledge, the ability to see the world through another's eyes, or at the very least, to recognise that others may view the world through different cultural lenses" (cited in Stewart 2006). Cultural competence requires ongoing and regular input and engagement to gain sustainable benefits and ultimately cultural fitness. We are developing an annual training calendar of cultural exchanges and experiences for our staff. Examples include sacred sites tours with Apmereke-artweye and arawe-irrentye, and singing and dancing maintenance ceremonies for particular plants or animals.
- Career case management to encourage existing staff to apply for and win management positions, thus enabling participation in decision making
- Implement the new department wide interactive online Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander employment strategy that has been designed to empower practical, targeted action to improve the attraction, retention and growth of our Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander workforce.

- Create a position for an Ethno-ecologist who can assist us to better represent and look after the plants, animals and country we work on
- Further develop relationships with strategic partners

Sustainable Aboriginal employment in Central Australia:

- is community owned
- is person centred not program focussed
- is outcome focussed, not process focussed
- is holistic (considers the individual's housing, transport, emotional and physical health)
- requires positive long term relationships and reciprocal strategic partnerships with local Aboriginal elders and families, organisations and businesses
- is about walking together not leading the way. Let's not work by deficits but rather by strengths. Instead of aiming to 'Close the Gap' why don't we aim to 'walk together to remove disadvantage'?

This is just the beginning of our story. We have a long way to go and look forward to that journey together.

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