Working with Indigenous Community Leaders in Cape York

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Over the past 4 years we have been running an 8 day Cape York Strategic Leaders Program in far North Queensland. The purpose is to work with leaders from remote indigenous communities in Cape York and so liberate their capacities to use their wisdom, experience and knowledge in an active and potent manner. We actively: apply the principle of spontaneity (Spontaneity rules!); reduce isolation between participants by building relationships; enlarge individual functioning and create and enjoyable learning-rich environments.

The program consists of a 5 day and 3 day residential program with around 25 participants from 5 or 6 remote communities. We seek to have a range of leaders attend - the Police Sergeants, the Directors of Nursing and local health workers, the Mayors, the community's General Managers, the School Principals, Justice Co-ordinators, community police, councillors and other formal and informal leaders. Usually 5 or so from each community attend. Sometimes people return to the subsequent programs with other colleagues from their community.

One thing that strikes us is that each community is unique in terms of its indigenous cultures, the language groups and connections with the land; and its colonial history which we would suggest is still in operation. So it is a complicated matter to have people from different communities. While there are clear connections and a pride in their differences, these differences are quite substantial.

Creating a Unified Warm Up

We do things at the beginning to create a unification of the group. One thing that works very well, perhaps an hour or two into the first session, is the focus: *"What is your country?"* and *"What is your first language?"* (Asking an indigenous person "what is your country" refers not to a national identity but to an identity forged between themselves and "their land." It is a personal relationship). We set it out dramatically on the stage. We then hear from each person.

In one program a man immediate warms up to being beaten all through his school life whenever he spoke his language. He now doesn't have the capacity to talk his own language and it's a very conflicted state for him to be even in a learning environment at all. Nevertheless he claims the language he doesn't speak. Everybody claims their first language although some people have two or three first languages.

The rest of the group warms up to this enactment.

We can think of it psychodramatically as self-presentation where there is an implicit role reversal by other participants. One of the things we've noticed in many indigenous cultures is that there's naturally an amount of space around a self-presentation which is very different to our Western culture. It appears they've had it forever. It could look to a Westerner that the group is going very slowly. But the full depth of what a person is bringing forward is apprehended somatically by the listener. It's obvious with the nonverbal responsiveness in the group

The group warms up strongly to each person telling their own story and in response to that there's space and a physical ingestion of what is being brought forward and the depth of it. We can't remember one superficial story being told.

There's an immediacy of living in the moment that's just right there. A depth of meeting really that, of itself, is a blossoming. It's not a prelude to something else.

When things get set out, we see that someone has lived in one place their whole life and speaks four local languages, and there are others who've lived in many places and have even more languages. Nobody only speaks only one language. Some have 7 or 8 languages. Setting this out in this way is an intervention in the group and of itself it's quite a powerful thing. It assists participants to go beyond their assumptions about each other, to know a bit more about their colleague as a person and in that process they start to become real.

Listening to history is an intervention in the group culture. It is a presentation of that person, not just historic. If we don't invite that to be set out it's very unlikely it will become known in the group. This process is a way of a lot getting known about a lot of people, creating a rich group picture. We get to create a picture of who we each are as a basis for working more together. A lot of people don't know about each other even though they live close together.

There's something about the process in the group that requires people to engage and if you do that enough in an easy enough way without too many overloads, people get to know each other and begin to feel good. We had a group of women that worked in the same community, distributing Government money paid for the children - one of the experiments being tried - but they barely knew each other. They actually created a firm friendship.

So we build the sociometry in an active way. As a result other things come out, not so obvious to us but obvious to others. Like *"there's my relative there who I'm not allowed to speak to"*. 'Poison cousins' is the white term. It's more complex that that - another woman says *"you may not realise it but I'm not allowed to pass in front of that person or speak before they do"*. The formal or hard-wired sociometry, the socio-telic (or maybe family-telic) does influence the informal sociometry a lot.

A Sociodramatic Exploration of Community Complexity

As mentioned, the Indigenous communities of the Cape York Peninsula are very complex social organisations. This complexity means getting a clear picture of the place is difficult for local as well as outsiders. In one program Diz realised that the group needed to have a future orientation or a future vision that took one another into account. She thought that the participants were focused on overcoming present day obstacles and that the future was simply "Tomorrow is today without today's problems" such as "Free of violence" or "No alcoholism" or "Safe children". These types of visions, according to Fred Emery, a world famous Australian psychologist, systems thinker and organisation developer, are caught in today's view of things, the current paradigms, the current pictures and operating worldviews and they are predominantly problem solving exercises (for an overview of Emery's work see Bawden, 1999). However, if we reflect a moment, our own experience will remind us that the way things are being done today were
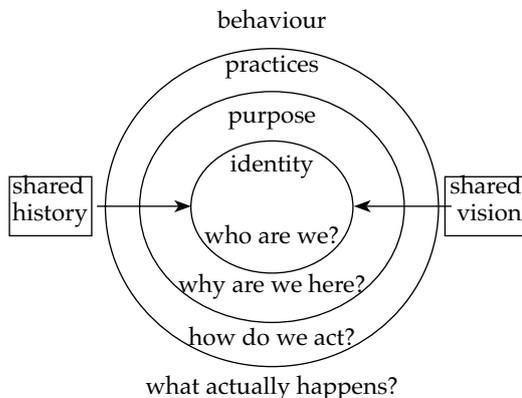
barely beginning 20 years ago. For example, the service industry boom, sexual equality, and flexible work place practices and so on.

Fred Emery wanted people to develop a vision that started from the future and worked back to the present rather than starting from the present then going forward. This requires an imaginative leap. Seeing the need for such an imaginative leap is important in a community. Deciding to take that leap into the future and having others follow is real leadership. However, as General Douglas Macarthur said *"The planning is everything, the plan is nothing"*. It is in the hurly-burly of developing an agreed, workable, visionary future that accounts for motivating factors as well as reactive forces that the real work of being human gets done and participants see the humanness, commonality and creativity of each other. The following is a description of a session run in the morning of second day of a residential three day follow up program designed to focus on sociodramatic and cultural interventions for these leaders.

Warm Up

First Diz presents Bob Dick's Onion model of Organisational Culture (2006), see Diagram 1. This is extremely useful for developing identity in a new community organisation. My job is to pay attention to the group and see what could be produced in action as a result of this warm up.

Diagram 1 : The Onion Model
of Organisational Culture (Dick 2006)

behaviour

practices

purpose

identity

shared history

who are we?

why are we here?

shared vision

how do we act?

what actually happens?

This diagram highlights the insight that shared history affects community identity. Indigenous communities have diverse histories with large common overlaps. This diversity comes from different land groups, different tribal or clan or family groups, different languages and different histories of oppression or support. However the reality of oppression is common. The reality of 'fucked up refugee in own country' experiences are appalling. The reality of being treated as slave labour or free labour is common. This model also highlights that shared vision is essential for a common identity. Diz's analysis was that there was a lack of visioning and a shared vision in many of the participants of the communities we were working with. The shared aspect of a community's vision requires strong relating so as to get over being competitive or self-righteous. In other words, to be able to reverse roles. At its best it engenders an encounter.

As Diz presents this model with numerous examples, there is thoughtful discussion and enquiry. Plenty of head nodding, reaching for note paper to take things down and thoughtful questions. Then a discussion gets going that highlights two different world views - essentially between two subgroups of the educationalists and the health system - that is irresolvable.

This is the move to action. I take the opportunity to produce this and a range of community divisions between world views. Working with these divisions is highly relevant when a leader is trying to create, develop or discover a shared vision in a community.

Scene 1: The community organisations try and share a vision.

We set out 5 subgroups from the community and the core of their worldview: Education *"For the kids"*; Health *"If they are sick they can't do anything"*; Police *"Without law and order nothing is possible"*; Justice group *"Without justice and fairness nothing will change"* and a Lord Mayor *"We make it all possible around here for workers, for service, for families. Without us - nothing."*

Participants are asked to join a group outside their expertise. I figure the display will be largely stereotyped but will both meet an act hunger and highlight the difficulty of getting to a shared vision. I then present the Diz flower model of shared vision.

Diagram 2.
The Diz flower model of Shared Vision
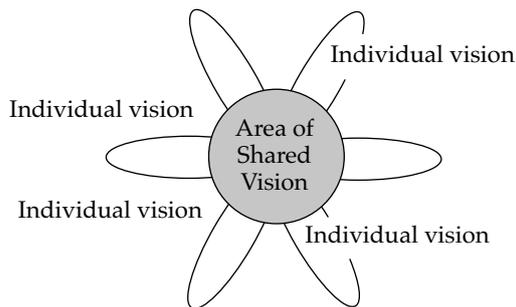
This diagram highlights that there is a likely shared vision and there are also aspects not held in common. Their job as a community is to find the shared aspects and not get stuck on the bits that aren't shared.

As director I use a particular type of interviewing for role, because participants have taken a generic social role rather than being a specific person. I say things that point to a common worldview of the group, for example, *"Well as police you see that Law and Order are crucial for the community to feel safe and happy.....?"*. Participants begin to warm up and respond *"Yeah that's right. We make people feel safe!"* Another says *"And they better get with the law. It is really simple. Do the right thing. That's it!"* They take up the role clearly and enjoy it.

I then ask them all to work as a single community. They take time to warm up in their small groups. They get together, they move around. Eventually they stand in a circle and it starts to look good. Then someone opens their mouth and it all falls apart. Competition emerges, active discouragement of others emerges, domination and rejection occur. I throw in some curve balls such as asking the participant playing the role of school principal to say regularly heard phrase in education circles. *"Well I don't know about*

all this stuff but its clear to me 'It's for the kids'", implying that anyone who doesn't go along with my simplistic motto is not 'for the kids' and is therefore reprehensible and stupid. The actual school principals in the room all chuckle.

I invite participants to, one at a time, express some of the thoughts and responses they have had during this process while in role. A kind of whole group soliloquy. A third of the group responds and all are present.

Scene 2: Expanding the System

I comment that in the first scene I only had organisational sub-groups. I now ask about family subgroups in one community. We name the specific community and someone says *"Oh! There are about 28 traditional owners."* *"Who is one?"* I ask. They name a person. I ask for others and participants take up the roles of being some of these people.

This time, interviewing for role means that the group members warm up to being a real person that they know. For example, I ask someone playing a traditional owner if there is tension - *"Yes everyone hates me!"* Once enough of the owners are there we begin to expand the system, adding the community police group, the senior public service people back in the Big Smoke - Assistant Police Commissioner; Regional Director for Health; Regional Director of Sport and Recreation; the Federal Indigenous Affairs Minister and his principal policy advisor; some media people seeking juicy stories. I ask them to all develop their shared vision. The sociodramatic question becomes clear "How can such a diverse community develop a shared vision?

Again I add curve balls - the School Principal is leaving at the end of the year, the Police is only there for a few more months, the Prime Minister has a juicy promotion for the Minister if none of this becomes a negative election issue, the school teacher is fresh out of college and is young and motivated and doesn't have a clue. They add in their own curve balls - the Mayor

is busted at a roadblock both drunk and trying to bring alcohol back into a community in his car. So, in one fell swoop, the Mayor who is also a traditional owner now has a criminal record for carrying a six-pack and may technically be unable to hold office. Tempers flare, funny bones are stimulated.

Deepening the Warm Up

I invite them to notice that they are mostly enacting a stereotypical version of the role they are in. I ask them to notice how easy this is and how inaccurate it also is. Many nod. Many mutter with a grin, *"Yes, that's right"*. I direct them to get to know that the person they are also has a family, friends, becomes isolated, is uncertain, insecure, maybe doing their best. Then I ask them to continue creating a shared vision. Some serious discussions begin. The production continues.

After 15 minutes I pause the action and ask them to say out loud some of the thoughts and responses that are not being enacted. This is done more fully than previously. Some of it is highly amusing, *"You bastards!"*. Some of it is highly poignant, *"I feel like cold water has been thrown over my enthusiasm"*, and some of it is highly personal *"I notice how I find this very hard being a police person"*.

Scene 3: Federal politician hits a road block.

I direct the participants to choose another role to take up and to swap with that person after a short discussion. Then we continue the current scenario. So some chose and some are chosen which creates a good mix of people outside their comfort zones. Participants take no more than a couple of minutes to get going, make the role their own and ramp it up further.

You may not be aware that road blocks are a new feature in Cape York. Now that take-away alcohol is illegal in some communities there is regular smuggling going on. So police now have to set up road blocks to catch the smugglers. Smuggling grog is very much

frowned upon. For example a state Minister lost her job from bringing in a bottle of red wine on the Government jet.

During the enactment the Minister decides to travel to the community in a four wheel drive convoy. He gets stopped at the road block along with everyone else. He tries to bluff and bluster his way through. Then the traditional owners come along and protest about the lack of protocol and making damn sure he gets the message not to bring in the army to the community (which is what is happening in one Australian state). Ironically it looks like this might be needed to get the Minister out. The media are working hard to really ramp up this story into a national headline - "Minister kidnapped in community - lawlessness follows visit." The confrontation reaches its peak and the scene is concluded.

Scene 4: "The world works best when..."

I focus participants on the worldview implicit in their role. I ask them to complete the sentence "The world works best when....." and to express this in the group. A range of worldviews emerge. "

> *"The world works best ... when people listen to me."* Minister.
> *"...when people are respectful and follow protocol."* Traditional owners.
> *"...when I can get a salacious story to sell the paper."* Journalist.
> *"...when directions are followed and I am obeyed."* Police.
> *"...when we are left alone to do what we know how to do."* Indigenous Counsellor.

And other similar responses are put forward in a simple manner.

I think of this as the first stage of sharing or debriefing. This process invites participants to immediately make something of what they have been doing and experiencing. It has them practice seeing the systems that others focus on and pay attention too. Doing this from those roles is entirely possible as it is largely an inductive process or some might say intuitive.

Doing it deductively (basing it on deducing the worldview from the data you get from another person) is very difficult for the participants and, indeed, for many people without adequate training, almost impossible.

Sharing

We sit in a circle. Everyone is invited to respond from themselves or their role. Sharing is profound. The first sharing comes from a community elder and leader and recounts a potted history of his community. *"We were a Lutheran church community before the Second World War ... made up of traditional owners and local people and also children and folks from all over Australia. We had a main language other than English... but we had to close down our community because we were at war with Germany.* (At the outbreak of World War Two, the missionary managing his Missionary community was interned and the people were sent away. Almost 1500 kms south of their community. Nearly a quarter of the people died during the following years from diseases. In spite of these adversities, in 1949 the survivors returned to a new site, and a new mission was formed.) *Later on, we all returned after the war and it got back on track ... Since then Native Title created divisions between the traditional owners and the second and third generation refugees from other places. These divisions continue today and this makes a shared vision both difficult and necessary."*

He then says that the model Diz put up captures completely the dilemmas he and others are facing. Three other elders in the group nod enthusiastically and mutter *"yeah, yeah"*. Other sharing comes, including the question, *"Do Traditional Owners actually want to get on together and leave old hurts behind?"* There are reflections on how stereotyping is easy and dangerous. All participants speak. Many share from both the role and from their responses to the enactment and reflections on their community. The level of spontaneity is high.

Next Day

The next day the value of the sociodrama is clear

to see. The participants discuss what it is like to be in the shoes of other people and groups. They are determined to find ways of developing a common or shared vision that includes all the members in their community. This is the work of the day.

The group is still working on the sociodramatic question "How can such a diverse community develop a shared vision?" Our simple answer is: to get into each others shoes and a diverse group can begin to create a common vision. The more role reversal and the better and easier it becomes

One further realisation from our work is that the historic stories aren't shared. Some of the traditional stories are known and shared and these vary from place to place. But the painful stories of oppression are not shared; the pain is kept silent and the silence grows too strong. Some silences give room for growth, life, play, emergence, creativity and expansion. Some silences give support to darkness, loneliness and isolation. Breaking the isolating silences allows new things to begin.

The principal of spontaneity is this. Spontaneity improves everything. Life emerges for spontaneity. The more spontaneity, the more life there is. High spontaneity means serious creativity. The application of Morenian principles in this group has developed spontaneity in the group and individuals and will translate to greater spontaneity in their communities upon their return. Teaching participants' ways to engage in spontaneity raising is one way of seeing our work.

References

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