



CLOSING THE WORK GAP IN CORPORATE AUSTRALIA:

Indigenous perspectives on effective engagement
between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
communities and the private sector

Sponsored by:



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MESSAGES FROM OUR CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICERS



For decades people have talked about improving participation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the mainstream Australian employment market. However a critical oversight in these discussions and debates has been the perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people themselves.

Consequently, in 2009 Diversity Council Australia initiated a series of research projects to capture Indigenous Australians' perspectives on what has come to be termed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment. The first of these laid out a series of recommendations for organisations seeking to better attract, engage and retain a high performing Indigenous workforce, and found that one challenge for organisations moving forward was to learn how to better engage with Indigenous communities.

Now in 2013, Diversity Council Australia is excited to partner with Lend Lease and Reconciliation Australia to deliver this second research report, which investigates Indigenous perspectives on effective community engagement for successful, sustainable and flourishing employment. The findings show in no uncertain terms that Indigenous peoples' voices and knowledge are key to enabling Australian organisations build sustainable and mutually beneficial relationships and partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, communities and organisations.

As we look forward to the prospect of recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in our Australian Constitution, and the evolving Indigenous narrative changing fundamentally to embrace new respect for the role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, communities and mobs in this modern Australia, I hope to see many organisations take new steps to build partnerships to turn this important symbolic act into lived reality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the workplace today – and help close the work gap.

Nareen Young
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER
DIVERSITY COUNCIL AUSTRALIA

MESSAGES FROM OUR CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICERS



Reconciliation Australia is pleased to partner with Diversity Council Australia and Lend Lease on this innovative research project exploring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives on effective community engagement in the private sector.

Effective engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, communities, organisations and businesses is a core focus of Reconciliation Australia's Reconciliation Action Plan program and an essential prerequisite for building respectful relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous Australians.

When done well, community engagement builds trust and understanding and lays the foundation for genuine and mutually beneficial partnerships in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices are heard and respected. It is in this environment that sustainable opportunities in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment, business and economic development can be realised.

I would like to extend my gratitude to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals who shared their insights and perspectives for this important piece of research and applaud those in the private sector who continue striving for best-practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander engagement.

Leah Armstrong
CHIEF EXECUTIVE
RECONCILIATION AUSTRALIA



"In the first eighteen months of our Reconciliation Action Plan I, and many Lend Lease employees, have had personally enriching experiences through collaboration with our community partners and engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Respectful engagement, cultural awareness and investing in building long term partnerships are critical in achieving our goal to have a pipeline of Indigenous talent for our sector."

Mark Menhinnitt
LEND LEASE GROUP EXECUTIVE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Acknowledgement is paid to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples past, present and future who have fought, and continue to fight, for their rights and formal recognition as Australia's first peoples. We acknowledge the special relationship that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have with their traditional lands and waters, as well as their unique history and diverse cultures, customs, circumstances and perspectives.

Diversity Council Australia ('DCA'), Reconciliation Australia ('RA') and Lend Lease acknowledge and value the important work being undertaken by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders across the Australian private sector. We wish to express our sincere thanks and appreciation to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research participants who so generously shared their cultural knowledge, insights and experiences. Without this generosity, the project would not have come to fruition. We would also like to acknowledge the non-Indigenous participants who further enriched the findings by sharing their thoughts and experiences.

DCA would like to thank the project's partner Reconciliation Australia and (extraordinary) corporate sponsor Lend Lease for helping conceive of and support the implementation of this project. Without their investment, this project would not have been realised.

Closing the Work Gap is a partnership research initiative between Diversity Council Australia (DCA), Reconciliation Australia (RA) and Lend Lease.

Why This Project?

The project was instigated as we recognised that meaningful employment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will only be fully realised when there is effective community engagement. Despite recent growing industry interest in and activity around Indigenous community engagement and employment, overall the statistics suggest Australian companies are yet to fully capitalise on Indigenous talent (ABS, 2012; Jordan, 2011; Taylor, 2012). Previous DCA research (2009) has established that one important explanation for slow progress in this regard is the need for Australian companies to better engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. With this in mind, and in light of recent growing industry interest and activity, DCA recently partnered with RA and Lend Lease to seek out the opinions of Indigenous thought leaders and practitioners on what constitutes effective community engagement for employment in the private sector. We felt it was critical to investigate and present Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives on effective community engagement, as to-date there has been a disproportionate focus on employer perspectives and experiences.

Our Approach

We interviewed 27 Indigenous thought leaders and engagement and employment practitioners, representing both men and women and a diversity of industries, types of organisations (i.e. companies, Indigenous peak organisations and service providers and government), organisational levels (i.e. from CEO to project officer) and geographical locations. We began by asking participants how effective they thought the private sector was at engaging Indigenous communities to improve Indigenous employment, before turning to the main inquiry focus, this being what they thought were the key characteristics of effective engagement.

The Findings: Indigenous Perspectives on Effective Community Engagement

While there was consistent recognition among participants that the state of play with respect to Indigenous community engagement by the private sector had improved over the past five to ten years, they felt there remained a long way to go. When asked to numerically rate private sector community engagement performance on a scale from one (very ineffective) to ten (very effective), participant ratings ranged between 3/10 to 7/10, with the overall mean rating across all participants being 5.1/10. Many practitioners we spoke with were working with the 'leading end of town' and so their responses often reflected that – typically they rated their own company as 6/10 or 7/10, but were quick to note that many companies were not doing much at all and so here their rating would be a 3/10. Interestingly, there was evidence that those working outside of companies were more likely to rate corporate performance lower, suggesting a level of corporate over confidence about how well it is doing.

Eight Characteristics of Effective Engagement:

Having asked participants to assess the private sector's performance in relation to Indigenous community engagement, we then asked for their views on what constitutes effective engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Participants identified eight key characteristics of effective engagement, these being:

1. Engagement Premised on Indigenous Perspectives:

One of the key findings from the report is that too many key Indigenous engagement positions in the corporate sector are still being filled by non-Indigenous people. More needs to be done to appoint internal Indigenous practitioners and leverage the existing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce.

2. Community Conscious Engagement:

Companies need to be clear about which Indigenous communities they need to engage with and what constitutes a community's boundary or fence line. Also critical are spending time finding the right people in community to speak with, and expecting differing opinions within community to emerge.

3. Strategic Engagement:

Successful engagement needs to be treated seriously by organisations and supported by sophisticated strategic frameworks, such as Reconciliation Action Plans. These outline clear goals, allocate responsibilities and hold all parties to account.

4. Engagement Focused on Two-Way Capacity Building:

Companies wanting to set themselves up for success need to view Indigenous community engagement and the resultant capacity building as a two-way partnership rather than one-way community service. Here, engagement focuses on and is explicit about two-way exchange of knowledge and skills from the outset, which benefits community and company alike.

5. Culturally Safe & Inclusive Engagement:

The best companies take the issue of cultural safety seriously. This means undergoing a cultural change of their own to ensure they have an environment where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people feel it is safe to be just that, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.

6. Clear and Authentic Engagement:

Clear intent and authentic transparent communication are critical for ensuring companies have a good reputation and brand in Indigenous communities. Failure to act in this way can do significant damage to company reputation, and take years to rebuild trust.

7. Taking Time When Engaging:

Investing time and resources to build the relationship was found to be a critical success factor. Too often engagement is short term and project driven. The best examples of corporate engagement are based on ongoing relationships built over the course of years. It takes time to build a shared understanding and trust in a partnership and this can't be rushed.

8. Engagement Using the Right Metrics:

Insufficient attention has been given to measuring the progress of engagement strategies and identifying the right metrics to do this. It is important at the outset to select a broad set of metrics to measure engagement effectiveness. Two important metrics are measures of sustainable careers (versus just short-term employment appointments) and measures of relationship and respect between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians (as seen in RA's Reconciliation Barometer).



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