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TOPIC C2 - Developing cross-cultural awareness and understanding

Non-Aboriginal Australia must face the fact that for a very long time we have proceeded on the basis that Aboriginal people were inferior, were unable to make decisions affecting themselves, that we knew what was best for them, that we had to make decisions affecting them, it became second nature for us to have that attitude. It is very easy for us to adopt that attitude which is very deeply resented by Aboriginal people, as it would, indeed, be by us if roles were reversed.

I say very frankly that when I started upon my work in this Commission I had some knowledge of the way in which broad policy had evolved to the detriment of Aboriginal people and some idea of the consequences. But, until I examined the files of the people who died and the other material which has come before the Commission and listened to Aboriginal people speaking, I had no conception of the degree of pin-pricking domination, abuse of personal power, utter paternalism, open contempt and total indifference with which so many Aboriginal people were visited on a day to day basis.

[SOURCE: Commissioner Elliot Johnston, QC, *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, National Report, Overview and Recommendations*, AGPS 1991.]

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people represent the longest surviving cultures in the world. They have lived on mainland Australia, Tasmania and many of the offshore islands for up to 60,000 years. While Indigenous Australians face significant disadvantage, compared with non-Indigenous Australians, their cultures remain as rich and diverse today as in pre-European days.

Why develop cross-cultural awareness?

It makes good business sense to develop an awareness and understanding of Indigenous culture.

This will enable you to:

- better engage with Indigenous people and organisations who can help you to improve your Australian Apprenticeship outcomes
- support your Indigenous Australian Apprentices to understand mainstream workplace cultures and to succeed in the workplace
- assist your employer clients and their staff to better appreciate the needs of their Indigenous workers so that there is effective cross-cultural understanding and communication in the workplace.

It is important to realise that it is not necessary to understand everything about Indigenous cultures in order to communicate effectively with Indigenous Australians.

What is important is that you need to understand that culture influences an Indigenous person's perceptions, behaviour, values and ways of communicating.

Cultural awareness will help you to address the barriers to effective communication that are likely to jeopardise your efforts at achieving successful Australian Apprenticeship outcomes for Indigenous Australians.

Who is an Indigenous person?

Commonwealth legislation defines Aboriginal as '...a person who is a member of the Aboriginal race of Australia'. For administrative purposes, an Indigenous person is someone:

- of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent
- who identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander
- who is accepted as such by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community in which he or she lives.

Note that while this Resource Kit refers to 'Indigenous' to describe both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, it is important to recognise that people from these backgrounds identify themselves as two distinct cultural entities.

Indigenous society and culture

While some aspects of Indigenous culture vary between districts, areas and regions, many characteristics are common across Indigenous society. This includes a focus on strong mutual obligations to extended family, where individualism may often be secondary to social cohesion and cultural responsibility. Not maintaining relationships and obligations could lead to the loss of Indigenous identity and support of the community.

Indigenous Australia is made up of about 40 different nations, with the majority of Indigenous people preferring to use their own terms to describe their identity (ie. nation, country, tribe, skin, language, Aboriginal or Indigenous). The following are some common terms for Indigenous people in the States and Territories:

- Koori – including NSW, ACT and Victoria
- Murri – including Queensland
- Nyoongah – including Western Australia
- Palawa – including Tasmania
- Nunga – including South Australia

Note, however, these terms are not confined to State/Territory boundaries and that there is likely to be a diversity of Indigenous people in a particular location. As well, some Indigenous groups prefer to be referred to by their tribal or traditional skin name. The important issue is that you make the effort to identify the preferred names of the Indigenous groups in your locality.

Some facts and figures

The following is a profile of Indigenous Australians:

- Indigenous people comprise 2.4% of the Australian population
- the median age of the Indigenous population is 20 (compared with 35 for the non-Indigenous population)
- children aged up to 4 years comprise 13% of the Indigenous population (compared with 6% of the non-Indigenous population)
- 58% of all Indigenous people are under the age of 25 (compared with 34% for the non-Indigenous population)
- older people (aged 65 years and over) comprise 3% of the Indigenous population (compared with 13% of the non-Indigenous population)
- 87% of Indigenous children aged 5-14 years attend an educational institution (compared with 95% of non-Indigenous children in this age group)
- 46% of Indigenous 15-19 year olds attend an educational institution (compared with 73% of non-Indigenous young people in this age group)
- of those people aged 15 and over, Year 8 or below was the highest level of primary or secondary schooling attained by 17% of Indigenous people (compared with 9% non-Indigenous people) and Year 12 or equivalent was the highest level attained by 17% of Indigenous people (compared with 40% non-Indigenous people)
- of the 12% of Indigenous people who speak an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language and English, 19% speak English 'not well'
- 19% of Indigenous families are one-parent families with all children under 15 years (compared with 7% of non-Indigenous families)
- 20% of Indigenous families are couples without children (compared with 36% of non-Indigenous families).

[SOURCE: ABS 2001 census data]

What issues are important when working with Indigenous communities?

An established and ongoing partnership is the key to successful working relationships with Indigenous communities. In many ways communities operate as extended families and value kinship ties. To achieve an effective partnership with your local Indigenous communities, you will need to understand their culture, values and customs.

Some of these important issues include:

- **Languages**

There are approximately 50 languages used within the Indigenous population, with many dialects of these languages also in use. However, the most common language used is a form of 'Aboriginal English'. This is predominantly English with a structure often reflecting an Indigenous language. Aboriginal English is not a 'broken' or 'bad' form of English. For example, *Kriol* and *Torres Strait Islander Creole* are forms of Aboriginal English that are functional dialects of English and are used within some communities for effective communication.

Many Indigenous people need support to further develop effective communication in standard Australian English. The support generally involves extending and broadening their existing language abilities to cope with the needs of their work and social situations.

An important point to acknowledge is that an Indigenous Australian's limited reading and writing skills in standard Australian English does not reflect on their ability to conceptualise.

- **Protocols when visiting communities**

When visiting Indigenous communities it is important to be aware of local expectations and cultural perceptions. These will vary greatly from community to community. Some communities are based on an extended family structure, while others may be organised according to language. This may impact on the prime loyalties of the community, with some families able to influence others. It is therefore, important to become aware of any 'local politics' that may impact on the communities and their relationship with you.

- **People relationships**

To be fully accepted in some Indigenous communities, outsiders need to be placed within their kinship system. Initially, this may take time as a decision is made about where you fit. However, the time spent sorting this out is critical to the building of trust in the community.

As with most Indigenous communities, relationship comes before anything else. If individuals are unable to form a strong relationship with communities, their efforts will be frustrated. The person who introduces you to a community is important to your acceptance. If the person is not liked, then there is a chance that this will also reflect on you. However, genuine efforts at building rapport may overcome such barriers.

While generally patriarchal, some communities may have a matrilineal base, or give women a greater say in decision making in certain matters. For instance, recent experience in the northern and western regions of Australia show men being involved with land rights issues and women with health, welfare and education.

- **The timing of your visits**

There are times when it may be inappropriate to enter a community. Periods of initiation, or mourning ('sorry time') are bad times to visit most communities on official business. It may also be impractical to visit on pension day. Also when visiting communities, there may be areas where you cannot go. These may include sacred sites, restricted areas during initiation, places set aside for Aboriginal law business or burial places. In many areas, only the initiated can visit certain sites.

- **The decision making process within the community**

It is important to get to know how a particular community operates - who to approach and how to go about business. In this respect, you should also be aware that in certain communities it is inappropriate for younger women to approach older men or for men to approach younger women. There may be a spokesperson for the community. If so, this person will rarely have the power to make decisions without consulting the rest of the community. It is a basic philosophy of most communities to involve everyone in the decision making process.

As a result, discussions with a community may take a long time. It is not simply a matter of formal talks. There may also be some waiting time required. It may take some time to get the appropriate people together and punctuality may not matter much to them. Equally, other critical problems may arise which will have precedence over meeting with you.

What issues are important when working with Indigenous communities? (continued)

- **The decision making process within the community (continued)**

Different communities will have different approaches to meetings and consultations. It is important to try to understand the local expectations with consultations and to avoid being offensive by demanding a particular meeting structure, setting or time.

From the outset, it is important to let the community know about your intentions and to allow them time to consider your comments. It may be inappropriate to demand an immediate answer and it is wise to sense when you have reached the limits of your demands. Communities will need time to consult before making any decisions. It takes time to disseminate information to the rest of the community and, for community people for whom English is a second or third language, time to process the information. Communities that have been subject to prior exploitation and interference by outsiders will not want to be rushed into decisions.

Always bear in mind that relationship is more important than reaching decisions for decision's sake and that the best results for all concerned will come from the establishment of rapport and trust.

- **The family and community structures**

In working with many communities, it is important not to be seen to be favouring one group over another. Sometimes communities will be in conflict with one another. Some communities may be well structured and organised with strong leadership that is able to present convincing cases for support. Others may be less well organised, yet in greater need of support.

Conflict within communities may arise for many reasons. For example, some members of a community may reject a spokesperson on the basis that they were not born in the immediate region or that they have left the community for some time. Or they may not be part of the leading family group.

- **Establishing trust**

Familiarity and trust building are paramount. Through interaction with people you will be able to build trust and work collaboratively towards a common goal. Build trust through integrity and by developing a greater understanding of the community, its people and their culture. In particular:

- maintain an ongoing working relationship with the community. It is not enough to make contact only when you need numbers or ticks in boxes
- do as you say and follow up queries and requests. (The community is only too familiar with providers who promise the world face-to-face, but then fail to follow up).
- be upfront about what is achievable and ensure you have a mutual understanding of the requirements (wants and needs) of both parties.

- **Showing interest and enthusiasm**

Demonstrate that you are enthusiastic to work with Indigenous communities and show commitment by:

- gaining support from a local Indigenous specific organisation. Prepare for the relationship by undertaking cultural awareness training
- assigning appropriate staff (who have undertaken cultural awareness training) to work closely with Indigenous communities and liaise with agencies which offer support and advisory services on a regular basis
- inviting Indigenous speakers to meet your staff. You could also consider inviting Indigenous representation on your Management Committees and Board of Directors.
- attending forums to learn about Indigenous programs to better service their Indigenous clients
- seeking involvement and participation in Indigenous events, such as job fairs, youth forums and activities in their local area (eg. National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) activities).
- dressing modestly when visiting a community – remember some communities are economically disadvantaged and individuals even more so.

What are some important cultural protocols and customs?

Many Indigenous people still respect and follow traditional customs.

Some examples that you may encounter are:

- **Eye contact**

Eye movement is very important when a younger person greets an elder. To show respect, they may have 'eyes down'. If you witness this in your own dealings, it should be taken as a compliment. It is also important to note that for many Indigenous Australians (particularly those in remote areas), this avoidance of making eye contact cuts across all interactions – not just those between younger people and elders.

- **The concept of time**

Since Indigenous people were tribal, their concept of time is quite different to a western concept of time. Tribal Aboriginals measured time through seasonal changes, and not by the western obsession with watches. This can cause some Indigenous people problems when working in mainstream organisations where there is a great emphasis on diaries, dates and times.

- **Shame**

If an Indigenous person said he/she was 'shamed' it generally means embarrassed. An Indigenous worker can often be quite shy and feel 'shamed' if singled out, or laughed at in front of their work mates. The 'singling-out' may be for positive reasons; however, it might leave an Indigenous person feeling shamed because they do not wish to appear better than anyone else – particularly better than any other Indigenous person.

- **Men's and Women's Business**

Indigenous societies respect the roles of both men and women equally. The earth is 'mother' to most communities. At the same time, Indigenous culture may have quite separate roles in passing down knowledge, to which are referred 'men's business' or 'women's business'. This simply means that some knowledge is under the protection of 'men only' or 'women only'.

- **Importance of the extended family, elder system and funerals**

An Indigenous community is usually quite small and its members have strong family networks and obligations. Indigenous elders are very important in the community and command a lot of respect. Most younger Indigenous members will listen to their advice and follow instructions. Aboriginal funerals are a very significant event and all members make every effort to attend them.

- **Silence**

Silence does not automatically mean Indigenous people have nothing to say. Long periods of silence and thought characterise meetings with Indigenous people. Given time and trust, they will express their opinions. Do not be disheartened if your meeting objectives are not realised or if decisions are not made by the end of meetings.

- **Tacit Approval**

In meeting with Indigenous Australians there may be an unwillingness to voice disapproval with what you are suggesting. This can be interpreted as tacit approval. It is vital that your communication is at all times aiming to elicit real responses (approval or disapproval, understanding or not understanding). It is recommended that once your meeting is over, you follow up with key Indigenous participants to find out how things were received.

- **Questioning**

Indigenous peoples are more likely to respond to indirect questions. Very blunt or direct questions may make them suspicious of the reasons for the questioning. They may not respond to a question whose answer is already known. They may also prefer to defer to a more authoritative person, or give the obviously desired answer in preference to the correct one. In addition, they may simply not enjoy talking about themselves.

- **Land/Sacred Sites**

Some traditional people hold the land in great significance and certain areas or sites are held sacred. This is why it is important to establish early in a relationship if there are areas of land that are out of bounds to you.

What are some myths about Indigenous Australians?

Many employers may have fears about employing Indigenous Australians that are based on community stereotypes that are often unfounded. These stereotypes must be broken down if Indigenous people are to be competitive in the mainstream labour markets. Here are a few common myths about Indigenous people.

- **They don't want to work, they're lazy**

While unemployment is a big problem, this is not because Indigenous people don't want to work. Typically, Indigenous people suffer disadvantage in a competitive labour market, which makes it harder for Indigenous people to get a job. In many country towns, a large number of Indigenous people are working for organisations, in government-funded CDEP programs, or 'work for the dole' schemes, because it is so hard for them to get mainstream jobs.

- **They might have a drinking problem**

This is an unfair stereotype as the figures indicate that the proportion of Indigenous people with alcohol problems is less than that for the general population. People often remember an Indigenous person who was drunk and presume wrongly that all Indigenous people have the same problem.

- **Aboriginal communities don't do much to help themselves**

In the 1970s, Indigenous people began to run their own organisations. There are now hundreds of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-run services across Australia. Indigenous organisations are constantly working with their people to improve their lives.

- **Most Aboriginals have lost their culture**

Just because some Indigenous people no longer live tribally and do not have jet-black skin, it makes no sense to say that they have no culture. Indigenous cultures have managed to survive the onslaught of European settlement (although they have been forced to change) and many Indigenous people still practise age-old traditions today. Just because some live in cities does not mean they do not regularly return to their homelands for cultural and spiritual events.



How can you become more effective in cross-cultural communication?

We suggest you consider three steps in the process

Step 1 – Enhance your self-awareness

In order to become more effective in servicing your Indigenous clients, you will need to enhance your self-awareness of such factors as:

- your own cultural upbringing
- the values you believe in
- preconceptions and stereotypes you may hold about others
- verbal and non-verbal communication styles.

Through greater self-awareness you will be in a better position to compare your cultural values with those of other cultures. This will help you better understand the cross-cultural barriers that Indigenous people face in adjusting to your workplace cultural values.

Step 2 – Develop your knowledge and understanding of Indigenous cultures

You can develop your knowledge and understanding of Indigenous cultures in a variety of ways. This may take the form of structured learning, research and/or participation in relevant events and activities.

A common strategy is to undertake cross-cultural awareness training. This is an effective way to:

- understand issues that are specific to Indigenous people
- enhance your skills and knowledge to assist Indigenous people gain and retain employment and training opportunities
- recognise and address situations that could lead to discrimination
- provide you with the tools to support employers, recruit Indigenous trainees and deal with practical cross-cultural issues that may arise from time to time in the workplace or in training situations.

There are many Indigenous cross-cultural training courses available around Australia. For example, many of the local Indigenous TAFE or Higher Education support units around Australia offer cultural awareness or Indigenous studies programs. These programs generally include topics on:

- perspectives
- language
- communication
- kinship
- country
- trusting
- protocols
- strategies
- activities (eg. art, dance, music, food).

The information can be presented with a focus on:

- general Indigenous cultural issues
- exploring your own cultural influences (see Step 1 above)
- a particular Indigenous group or area
- a particular industry or mode of interaction.

Step 2 – Develop your knowledge and understanding of Indigenous cultures (continued)

How well a particular course suits you may depend on factors such as:

- length of course
- location (eg. external or in-house)
- method of delivery (interaction through relevant role-players is seen as a plus)
- local content
- size of class
- degree of customisation to your needs and context
- coverage of 'political' issues
- whether there is national accreditation
- involvement of Indigenous people in the development and delivery
- application to relevant cross-cultural situations.

You can also build your awareness of Indigenous culture by researching and taking part in activities and events that highlight the richness of Indigenous culture. You can start by:

- researching the cultures and lifestyles of Indigenous Australians.
 -  for example, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) is a national institution that has researched many aspects of Indigenous peoples – past and present. Located in Canberra, AIATSIS has a library, publishing house and bookshop, and houses the world's largest collections of print, photographic, audio and film materials for study. Visit www.aiatsis.gov.au
 - other interesting sites for research are:
 - National Native Title Tribunal www.nntt.gov.au
 - Australian Bureau of Statistics www.abs.gov.au
 - Human Rights Commission www.humanrights.gov.au
- taking part in important events in the Indigenous calendar, such as:
 -  NAIDOC Week (July or September)
 - National Reconciliation Week (27 May-3 June)
 - National Aboriginal and Islander Children's Day (4 August)
- attending other Indigenous events and places, such as:
 - art exhibitions
 - music festivals
 - sporting events
 - national reconciliation projects.

Step 3 – Develop your cross-cultural communication skills

The third step is to successfully integrate your self-awareness and cross-cultural understanding into activities that will support Indigenous Australians to obtain and retain Australian Apprenticeships.

This step is up to you, but remember that in improving our cross-cultural or intercultural communication it is NOT necessary to:

- change your culture, although some modifications may be practical at times
- like the culture(s) you engage with – that may not be realistic – but a degree of respect is essential
- accept other cultures – but it is essential to accept that other cultures are valid (at least for their members)
- understand everything about the cultures you engage with – that is a very difficult task for an outsider. Instead, you need to understand that culture influences people's perceptions, behaviour, value systems and ways of communicating, and you need to try to determine which characteristics of a particular culture are most critical to success (or failure) of Indigenous participation in Australian Apprenticeships.

There are a number of organisations around Australia that offer commercial services, advice and resources to companies to increase diversity and inclusion. These services can include:

- customised diversity programs and strategies
- an extensive range of training programs in all areas of diversity
- mediation services
- dispute systems for workplaces
- diversity audits
- access to extensive disability and Indigenous networks that can assist businesses source the best-qualified candidates from the broadest possible pool of talent.



CASE STUDIES

SMYL - Developing a Cultural Awareness

South Metropolitan Youth Link (SMYL) in Western Australia is a community-based charity enterprise focusing on developing Indigenous Australian Apprenticeships and other training opportunities leading to full time employment. It is a combined RTO, GTO and job placement agency in which employment and education for Indigenous people is seen as a social justice issue. Their primary role is to facilitate initiatives through partnerships with government departments, shire councils, corporations and Indigenous organisations. Projects include:

- school-based Australian Apprenticeships, including exploration of 'alternative' schooling options
- building and construction partnerships in remote localities
- partnerships with civil construction contractors to achieve equal employment opportunities for Indigenous people on major public infrastructure projects
- support for Indigenous enterprises to develop the skills of their workforce and to assist with achieving commercial viability.

The focus of SMYL on Indigenous employment, education and training issues means that all staff are required to achieve a high level of cultural awareness and understanding. SMYL conducts cultural awareness training in-house with the assistance of their Indigenous employees. One of SMYL's current Indigenous trainees has recently reviewed and updated the company's cultural awareness training program as part of their business services traineeship.



www.smyl.com.au

The Pathways Program

The Pathways Program, a joint venture between Group Training NT and Centralian College, was the first school-based Australian Apprenticeship program in the Northern Territory. The program is designed to provide a gradual transition from being a full time student to a full time employee. The program has 30% Indigenous students enrolled and has a strong focus on providing continuity of the student's social networks so that the training does not alienate them from their peers and friends.

Formal and informal partnerships are considered a major strength of the program. For example, the Northern Territory Police Juvenile Diversion Unit offers the Pathways program to young Indigenous offenders as an alternative to court or jail, in collaboration with parents and victims.



www.gtnt.com.au

Dreamtime Cultural Centre

The Dreamtime Cultural Centre in Rockhampton (Queensland) is an initiative of the Central Queensland Aboriginal Corporation for Cultural Activities. The Centre is a major Indigenous tourism and conference centre, with a thirty-room 4 Star Motel.

The Company employs an all-Indigenous staff. It has achieved high success rates in the retention of Indigenous staff through the provision of support strategies, including addressing cross-cultural issues.

Many of the staff that were employed at Dreamtime have moved into mainstream positions in the broader community.



www.dreamtimecentre.com.au

CASE STUDY

Placer Dome

Placer Dome, a large company in the Western Australian mining industry, takes considerable care in the selection of a supervisor/mentor for all of its Indigenous Australian Apprentices. They are provided with support to develop cultural awareness and other relevant skills to ensure an appropriate working environment for the Indigenous trainee.

By working closely with the Laverton Leonora Cross Cultural Association (LLCCA), Placer Dome engages two Indigenous apprentices each year in 4-year apprenticeships. To date, five apprentices have graduated from the program, which aims to:

- increase the level and retention of Indigenous employees in the mining industry in the north-east goldfields
- provide developmental training to individuals keen to work in the mining and alternative industries
- improve relationships between Aboriginal communities and the mining industry
- provide a wide range of training programs to all sections of the community
- support community initiatives involving reconciliation or the general well-being of Aboriginal people.

The LLCCA is a unique organisation in that it is supported by the Aboriginal community, local mining companies, and the state government. The original dwelling and land were donated by the mining industry, and the Board of Management is generally made up from Aboriginal organisations, mining companies, and other stakeholders. Since its inception in 1997, the Association has assisted in placing approximately 30-40 Indigenous people per year into meaningful full-time employment, and has provided pre-employment training for many others.

The LLCCA provides a crucial service to Indigenous people in the north-east goldfields. Individuals seeking employment register at the LLCCA, are assisted in compiling a resume if required, offered various training programs as needed, and are placed in employment. In addition, staff from the Association support employees with on-the-job mentoring. The staff have developed valuable relationships with the Aboriginal community, mining companies, training organisations, and commonwealth and state government departments.

As part of a plan to increase its services to the broader community, the Association formed a significant partnership with Curtin University in Kalgoorlie to promote and deliver Curtin training programs at the LLCCA and also in surrounding communities. The Association is able to deliver a wide range of low cost training programs including an Adult Certificate of General Education, and also workplace specific training to enhance employment prospects.

The Association will, wherever possible, also sponsor and assist any community initiative that enhances either reconciliation or the general wellbeing of Aboriginal people.

Members of the LLCCA include:

- Wongatha Wonganarra Aboriginal Corporation (Laverton)
- Burrna Yurrul Aboriginal Corporation (Laverton)
- Aboriginal Movement for Outback Survival (Mt Margaret)
- Mulga Queen Aboriginal Community
- Carey Mining
- Anglogold Australia
- Placer Dome (Granny Smith)
- Sons of Gwalla
- Eurest
- Roche Bros
- The W.A Dept. of Training
- Curtin University (Kalgoorlie)



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