Overall Goal

Aboriginal people, families and communities being empowered to live good lives and choose their own futures from a secure foundation.

Principles

Empowerment and self-determination

Institutional racism is alive and well. This being evident in the many government systems, structures, policies and programs which continually skirt around the issue instead of meeting the needs of Aboriginal people. If such systems did meet the needs successfully then a lot of government workers will be out of work. For instance, health is one of the major examples I can point to. The intention from policy-makers are never explained fully but rather, another level below the policy-making body become the interpreters of such policies. According to their understanding they will define the policy and pass it down the line, sometimes the most useful policies designed to simplify processes become the victim of the process itself, leaving those who are needing to implement the policy frustrated and exhausted from all the ongoing discussion between people who were not party to the policy being designed and subsequently written. Yet there is endless policies that cover every aspect of work within the organisation. But who writes the policies? Who is at the table when such policies are discussed and designed?

The problem is that policies are written with their own 'escape clause' – if the original intent is questioned, then the wording of the policy itself will be so broad that any other intention can be quickly substituted for the one being questioned. Policy being founded on language and a play on language – so those people who do not fully grasp a language, such as English, are already disadvantaged when presented in a forum where the majority of those present will 'compete' with each other as to who knows more about the English language.

Historically, Government has always viewed Aboriginal people, families and communities as a 'problem'. Government is therefore not the experts on this matter, but will insist on dictating terms instead of finding a compromise. Again using health as the example, not getting it right in the first place has contributed to many of the Aboriginal health problems which we have today.

Culture and country

Culture is very important to Aboriginal people but it is relative to the area (country) that one is living and/or working. Recognition of the tradition owners of areas must be at the core of any delivery of service, yet disputes within groups should never be used as a reason to ignore the identity of local traditional owners or seen as a reason to bypass acknowledgements.

Diversity of people and places

Urban, regional and remote locations continually compete for limited funding. Each region needs to be recognised as unique. Policies and programs must fit in with what is identified as a priority for the particular region – not what is identified on a State-level. The regions miss out on being noticed if larger, more populated locations are driving the process.

Services

Most government organisations have access policies. However, where these services are most needed is where service provision is lacking the most. For instance, in many regions there is no Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder diagnostic service, yet many young adults who have been diagnosed in the metropolitan area have moved back to regional communities and it is these communities which are impacted. Limited resources means that staff are stretched to the limit.

Evidence

While policy should be informed by relevant evidence, the evidence needs to be made available to all participants in decision-making.

The impact over initiatives must be evaluated over realistic time frames; investment and service should be sustained for long enough to produce measurable results. Innovation and flexibility are critical to success. Timeframes need to be long enough to warrant the gathering of evidence instead of trying to fit within the funding cycle of allocated funds (ie lifespan of monies received via grants, etc) Evidence gathering must be allotted sufficient resources including money to travel to remote, regional areas if this is warranted.

Strategic elements

Culture

There needs to be a halt to cultural exploitation.   It isn't all about economic benefits – cultural richness comes from what is learnt and passed on through elders. Identification of who we are – without added interference from non-Aboriginal people, places the responsibility of cultural continuity back on the people themselves.

Culture must also be incorporated into program and infrastructure design, especially in areas where Aboriginal people make up a high percentage of the population. Added to this is the need to consider the ways of working with Aboriginal people. Cultural Awareness training packages need to be tailored to suit each region and areas within those regions need to be considered as well. It isn't good enough to say that over 80% of a workplace has undertaken an online cultural awareness/security training program if only 20% of that workforce has only ever met face-to-face with traditional owners of the land in which they are working on. Resources and time must be allocated so that time-poor employees of Government departments are meeting the obligation to deliver services within a culturally-appropriate setting.

Closer to communities

The problem with metro-centric decision-making is that decisions impacting on regional, remote communities are being made by people who are not based in the areas they are talking about. While this makes it easier to exclude the people factor in the decision-making, it really is a very unfair way of doing such a process. The people most impacted by such decisions are rarely included in the discussion – leaving their representatives to be persons who have not lived or worked in the designated community for many years, or whose individual focus has changed to be more aligned with persons living away from the community under discussion.

It is also unfair to think that decisions made in a Geraldton for service delivery in Carnarvon should be done by high-level managers without the input of Aboriginal community members from Carnarvon. The beauty of regional-based locally-grown Aboriginal workforce members is that they are already connected to the community by living where they do so why not tap into this resource and include such ones in the discussions around the decision-making table?

One big plus from the native title process has been the way such a process has been able to empower Aboriginal people Australia-wide. So taking that further, Aboriginal people are able to move from being passive, individual consumers of services to being part of a larger structure aimed at self-determination with the means to make decisions which will impact their future.

Fully agree with the idea of empowering regions and having some kind of regional structure in place to accomplish this.

Aboriginal-led solutions

Many decisions around service design are made by non-Aboriginal people. This is regardless whether the organisation is a recognised Aboriginal community-controlled organisation or not. Quite often the management structure within such organisations consist of non-Aboriginal people. As a result, such ones are often recycled through many departments and tend to rely on making the same decisions as they have always made leading to the same results.

The competitive nature of awarding Government contracts doesn't always mean the best based organisation wins the contract. For many such organisations it is all about the money at the end of the day such organisations are businesses. Aboriginal people need to be given the opportunity to take on decision-making to ensure their input into the process is valued.

Contracts need to be awarded on the grounds of skill development and enhancement for Aboriginal people. Such desired outcomes aimed at enhancing the skill levels of local Aboriginal people need to be highly regarded.

Preventative initiatives

Resources need to be better managed and move towards a share basis with other service providers. Emphasis needs to shift towards preventative services and early-intervention initiatives. Greater emphasis needs to consider the social determinants of health and ensure that service providers are available to take up the challenge of ensuring these are being met in all regions.

Added to the initiatives is the need for program evaluation to measure effectiveness and consider ways to improve service delivery. Treating such delivery as essential rather than just a numbers game helps program planners to measure the impact on individuals.

Initiatives need to be directed by trained staff and not placed into the 'too hard basket' because the timeframe needed to produce measurable results run longer than that of usual financial deadlines. Results may be needed over a longer period than those required to report financial outcomes back to the funding body. By allocating sufficient resources to conduct program evaluation then outcomes can be more readily defined.

Economic opportunities

Existing frameworks designed to boost cultural economies need to be strengthened. Cultural outcomes can include a wide range of activities and these need to be supported. Along with such activities, participants can be introduced to new economic initiatives to increase economic independence.

Youth can also be introduced to career development opportunities and attend expos which showcase new types of employment opportunities as economies grow and change. Rather than old ideas trying to be revamped the youth must also be exposed to new initiatives and technology to expand their ideas and opportunities.

Building capacity through skill training, formal education , business assistance and support programs will help to develop economic opportunities. The key to many opportunities is exposure and this should be aimed at reducing many of the obstacles community members face when living in isolated communities.

Building cultural understanding and respect

Embedded institutional racism continues to exist. No matter how much organisations try to identify and remedy policies, the problem lies deep within the very foundations of society. Public sector workforce responds with trying to recruit and retain Aboriginal staff but it is the very culture within such workplaces which undoubtedly contribute to failures.

We see examples where initiatives to employ Aboriginal staff to increase numbers are usually based on accessing external funding for running training programs and when such programs have ended the Aboriginal person is left high and dry and without further employment.

In some public sector workplaces, the Aboriginal positions are paid so much less than mainstream positions, yet non-Aboriginal staff rely on the Aboriginal person to perform their daily duties. As soon as the word "Aboriginal" appears on the JDF then it straight away refers to the job being paid substantially less. The person will be viewed as a trainee or some other temporary worker.

And then we have the other angle where Aboriginal people sit in mainstream positions and now because the work "Aboriginal" doesn't appear in the JDF then it is assumed the person knows nothing about Aboriginal people they work with. Aboriginal workers who are employed from the local community still remain members of the Aboriginal community can be under-valued.

Framework

Governance

The function of the Western Australian Aboriginal Advisory Council (WAAAC) needs to be promoted. It will be good to see how WAAAC in each region will be designed.

Implementation

Exciting times ahead as all agencies will be expected to work together.

Accountability

Will a statutory office of accountability and advocacy in Aboriginal affairs keep track of the movement of funds to such a level so that we no longer will see senior public service employees being up on stealing offences?

Evaluation of programs is a very important element of program planning and if it remains the responsibility of each agency the importance of evaluation may be lost. My experience in this field has shown that usually when program costs run over budget then evaluation is done with what is remaining of that budget leading to a not so effective result. Lazy evaluation habits – such as online surveys – do not get the level of engagement needed to fully evaluate programs aimed at Aboriginal people. We know that there is a huge need for qualitative evaluation when dealing with Aboriginal communities, but most times it is quantitative evaluation which is presented. Accountability needs to consider that more than figures and percentages is important – and if the same way of doing things continues then the same old results will be captured each and every time.

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