

THE VALUE OF PHILANTHROPY MESSAGES FROM THE PROJECTS

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There were a number of key learnings that emerged for the local communities, their leaders, and the evaluation team. These are identified in each of the project narratives, and are summarised briefly here. These key messages emerging from the project evaluations will assist the Telstra Foundation in its goal to support community organisations with their research and evaluation capacity, and to enhance the accountability of the Telstra Foundation to its various stakeholders by measuring the impact and effectiveness of its grants. They also have implications for future program development and implementation, not only by Telstra Foundation, but other philanthropic bodies, government bodies, businesses or community development agencies.

TRUST

It takes time to build relationships. Project workers who come in from outside the community need to spend time in the community to get to know the local people and how their community operates. This is important not only in building trust, but also in being able to tailor a program to meet the specific needs of the community. A critical aspect of building trust is to identify community brokers – key people in the community who are aware of the importance of the project, perhaps know of the project worker's credentials elsewhere, and who can 'vouch' for the program and the individuals involved.

But trust goes both ways: it is not only about trying to foster the trust of Indigenous communities, but about funding bodies and project workers also trusting the local community. This means having good relationships with Elders and other key players, taking the time to communicate, explain, allay fears, and then to trust that communities not only understand best their problems, but also are the ones who can be empowered to identify and work with solutions.

Trust needs to exist between the funding body, the projects, and the communities. It needs to be a closely-knit triangle for community development projects to work effectively and be responsive to local conditions and local needs. This involves listening to—and respecting—the vision of local Indigenous communities, but also having patience. Lasting change doesn't happen overnight.

One project coordinator said:

“It is great that companies like Telstra are actually interested in these community programs. It's definitely needed in this town – or any town, but it has definitely made a difference and I think that's the bottom line isn't it?”

FLEXIBILITY

One overall learning that emerged from the evaluations was that the boundaries do blur between many of the community development activities in which local organisations are engaged. Many of the projects funded under the Telstra Foundation scheme were located in organisations that were busy, often on a range of programs and projects.

“The network has been running a range of programs and services for the community over the past ten years. So it was easy to get the project up and running because we've done it before.”

Using established community networks as a platform to establish new services means that you enjoy the benefits of 'economies of scale', as long as you understand that programs often become intertwined. Funding bodies need to build in flexibility to their objectives and the deliverables they require, and value the type of integration between services that naturally occurs when services organically develop within the context of a local organisation working in the community and responding to its needs.

For example, a number of agencies were providing a broad range of services for children, and it was sometimes hard to delineate which parts of the projects were strictly falling within the funding arrangements, and which ones were not. The important message is that it should not be important. If project funding can add value to existing projects, and this leads to tangible outcomes for the community, then it has met the overall objectives of the funding scheme. The beauty of philanthropy is that projects do not necessarily have to be as tied to pre-determined deliverables as some government-funded schemes. The flexibility of a philanthropic trust should be employed to its full advantage to add value to such community activities.

LEVERAGE

Related to the issue of flexibility is the ability to use funds to leverage further investment in the community. This can be literally leveraging additional funds, or utilising the changes brought about by a small program to introduce systemic change in communities. A prime example of this is working with schools. Small changes in curriculum or support programs not only can make life changes for individuals; they build a sustainable base for ongoing changes in the community, as each new cohort of students move through the school system. These can be crucial early steps towards the broader goal of reconciliation.

We saw examples of how the Telstra Foundation funding has credentialed projects to get more capacity and set them up well to get funding from other funding schemes, such as the Australian Youth Foundation.

We saw significant evidence of how project funding from the Telstra Foundation meant existing projects could be expanded or continued, how a funded-project led to the establishment of a new project, or how seeding funds led to the procurement of additional funding from other sources.

INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP

The need to build a connection to their culture for Indigenous young people was a key element in most of the projects. This involves identifying potential leaders in the young people who can take on the role of learning, fostering, respecting and communicating their culture to their own generation – and into the future.

Leadership is a two-edged sword: it is important to identify and use community leaders to bring about change; however, too many demands can easily be placed on key individuals. There is much truth to the old adage: “If you want a job done, give it to someone who is busy”. Many projects were being supported by—or implemented by—key leaders in their local communities. Burnout needs to be avoided by expanding the leadership base.

The good practices, significant developments and opportunities for leverage described in these 14 projects are due in no small part to the key Indigenous leaders who are exemplified here. In particular, there

is evidence that many of the needs would not have been identified—nor the projects developed—without the leadership of inspiring, hard working and skilled Indigenous people. This is true not only for those key people responsible for developing the projects, or liaising with communities, but also for the many Indigenous workers and members of the local communities who assisted with implementation at each stage of the project. By relying on leadership from within local Indigenous communities, many of the issues identified here as critical success factors—trust, flexibility, leverage and building sustainability—were incorporated into the project.

The key message that emerges from these projects is that community development activities need to build leadership in the next generation. Intergenerational communication and skill-transfer is important. This is crucial for sharing the load, and for ensuring sustainability. Many of the projects utilised principles of intergenerational transfer – exposing young people to the ideas and experiences of Elders, project coordinators and other leaders.

But leadership is not just something demonstrated at the community level. It is also something that needs to be fostered within individuals. Each person can be encouraged to show initiative, and to take leadership of their own life, their family, and the areas within their community where they can have influence. Important mechanisms for this are building cultural pride, self-esteem, and self-determination. This is done through projects that focus on youth engagement and youth participation: fostering different models of leadership and different styles of communication.

BUILDING SUSTAINABILITY

Finally, a crosscutting theme was the importance of sustainability. “Sustainability is a key issue for Indigenous communities” (Dodson 2002, p. 25). Many Indigenous communities are hurting from having their hopes raised that good things will happen, only to have funding dry up, programs peter out, and changes come to a standstill. One of the key criteria for funding projects was that they had the capacity for sustainability. In working with the communities, one of the goals of the evaluation team was to assist communities in reflecting on—and documenting—how their projects were able to build in elements of sustainability.

In order to ensure a broad impact, the evaluation strategy also focused on working with projects to help them document their capacity for modelling a new approach for wider application. Yes, many projects would like ongoing funding. And many deserve ongoing funding. But the critical issue is that lasting resources have been developed. One critical mechanism for ensuring sustained community change was to target schools: either to locate the program in the school, or to work cooperatively with schools to support the program. Educational resources, curriculum enhancements, economically self-sustaining youth groups, worker education kits, teacher guides, networks, archives and relationships are all critical outcomes that ensure the sustainability of the excellent work that we witnessed in the communities across the country.

Building sustainability is important if we are to turn around the poor social indicators highlighted earlier. As one project worker noted:

“Philanthropic trusts – and any entity looking at triple bottom line or wanting to repay social dividends – need to be involved. They will want a workforce that otherwise won’t be there. If only 2% of the Aboriginal population can be in the workforce, we have a problem! It may not affect people in Canberra and Melbourne yet, but its big time here!”

Resources or training packages will need to continue to be revised and/or amended to suit the learning needs of the target audience. But the most critical mechanism for ensuring sustainability is whole-of-community involvement, utilisation of local knowledge, local

resources and local personnel, and adopting a holistic approach to planning and development of projects in order to guarantee ownership.

Philanthropy can play an important role in assisting Indigenous communities to develop and change. However, Dodson (2002) also noted the value—in return—of Indigenous partnerships to philanthropic organisations and businesses involved in philanthropy. It provides opportunities for meaningful relationships with Indigenous Australia, opportunities to initiate cultural awareness training for staff, and to break down perceptions among Indigenous Australians of the corporate world being the “other”. He writes:

“If together we can build the capacity of Indigenous people to move from a position of impoverishment to one of prosperity; if together we can help Indigenous people to participate fully in the social, political and economic activities of our nation; and if, together, we can do all of this without compromising Indigenous cultures and identities – that will be cause for celebration.” (DODSON 2002, P. 25).