

J) Sunraysia Indigenous Project (Australia)

A community based organisation – the Sunraysia Area Consultative Committee has utilised an Australian Government employment program, their extensive business networks and strong community support to create a comprehensive training and placement initiative that has resulted in 200 young Indigenous people in three years gaining ongoing fulltime employment. This Program combines pre employment training, job skills training, mentoring, cross cultural training and job placement.

BACKGROUND AND DESCRIPTION

The Sunraysia Region, (population: 56,000 persons) located in the northern areas of the Australian state of Victoria was certainly not noted for the employment of Indigenous Australians outside Indigenous organisations. In 2002, there were only 160 Indigenous Australians in open employment – 150 worked for Indigenous organisations, and half of those in mainstream employment worked in fast food outlets. However, over a three year period, a volunteer, non profit, community based organisation – the Sunraysia Area Consultative Committee (ACC) – has spearheaded a community initiative that has seen 200 Indigenous Australians (primarily young people) placed into full time ongoing employment.

The Sunraysia ACC operates with the following mandate -“ *engaging government, business and the community to create opportunities for sustainable economic, social and environmental development*”. The Chairperson of this organisation, local businessman, Mr Don Carrazza, owner/manager of the Grand Hotel, believed there was a need for a concerted community and local business focus on the employment in mainstream jobs of local Indigenous Australian young people, aged 15 to 24 years in the Sunraysia ACC region, a group with a disproportionately high unemployment rate – over 36 per cent, in

contrast to 11 per cent for non-Indigenous Australians. Some Indigenous families in the Sunraysia Region had experienced four generations without a member being in paid employment – a real saving in terms of government unemployment benefits.

Through his personal championing of the project, Don and the efforts of Project Coordinator, Bill Carroll Sunraysia ACC has achieved extremely high job placement results. Utilising an Australian Government employment program, namely the Structured Employment and Training Projects (STEP) Programme, their extensive business links and strong community support, the Sunraysia ACC has created a comprehensive initiative that incorporates the following elements –

- pre employment training;
- job skills training;
- mentoring support;
- cross cultural training for both employers and employees;
- travel and uniform assistance;
- placement into suitable employment; and
- high community profiling of success and achievements.

Employment success has been in a diversity of industry sectors including hospitality, local government, tourism and travel, motor mechanics, horticulture, administration, transport and distribution, power supply, aged care, building and construction and tourism.

KEY PARTNERS

- Private Sector – the Sunraysia ACC is primarily composed of local business people committed to the region’s future economic and employment development. This Project depends strongly on the willingness of local employers to broaden traditional employment recruitment practices and engage with, and employ young Indigenous Australians. In the words of Bill Carroll, Project Facilitator – *“committed, informed employers are obviously necessary in the process -*
- **Australian Government** – this project has had major Government financial input through its STEP Programme which provides flexible funding for packages of tailored assistance, to help employers give long term jobs to Indigenous Australians. Assistance is tailored to business needs and can include approaches such as funding for apprenticeships and mentoring that can lead to lasting employment.
- **Local Community** – in the words of the former Federal Minister for Workplace Participation, Dr Sharman Stone – *‘this Project was generated in Mildura through community spirit and a concern for all of its members.’* (Sunraysia Daily:1) The host organisation for this initiative, namely the Sunraysia ACC, is a non profit, volunteer community based organisation.

IMPACTS / ACHIEVEMENTS

As mentioned, around 200 long term unemployed Indigenous people have been placed into sustainable employment within a four and a half year period. The organisation has committed to further place about 40 participants into employment by mid 2008. Retention within work far exceeds the national average for employment of Indigenous Australian.

Project coordinators and local people identify three major social changes happening now in the Sunraysia region due to this initiative, namely –

- Local employers are now far more willing to consider employing an Indigenous worker.
- Indigenous people, especially young women are now motivated to step forward and seek employment, as they now believe there is a chance of getting a job rather than opting for a lifetime of dependency on a single parent pension.
- Indigenous students attempting the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) at Mildura senior college, are demonstrating more school “stickability” as they hear about the success of Indigenous job seekers and it has enhanced their perception of the importance of school completion (Employment Extra: 10)

SUCCESS FACTORS / LESSONS

The Sunraysia Indigenous Project has eight key lessons namely -

- **The respect that the Sunraysia ACC organisation enjoys within the community.**
- **Personal commitment and championing by a prominent business person,** Mr Don Carrazza and his extensive employer networks and strong standing in the community has positively influenced community and employer engagement. He has also led from the front and has become a “*champion employer*”, at one stage employing seven young Indigenous trainees in his own business.
- **Employment of a dedicated skilled and enthusiastic Facilitator,** - Bill Carroll acts as a broker between the young people and the employer. In the words of the Director of the Government’s Indigenous Employment Programs- “*The success of the Sunraysia Indigenous Project is mainly due to two people – the Chair of the ACC and its Project Facilitator.*”
- **Creation of new personal networking opportunities** - most of the jobs in the region are not advertised, but filled through word of mouth and personal and informal networks, which often disadvantages groups like young Indigenous people. The Sunraysia Project has created a new personal networking dynamic that overcomes this disadvantage.
- **High community and media profile,** the Project has a monthly celebration of success through an ‘*Indigenous Trainee of the Month*’ Award that culminates in the ‘*Indigenous Trainee of the Year*’ Award event. These awards acknowledge trainee excellence in punctuality, reliability, presentation, service and attitude, as

well as recognition of employer commitment to best practice in Indigenous employment practice. Giving employer public recognition is a vital action. Achievement of any milestone in the Project is used as an excuse for celebration and media exposure, which strengthens community awareness.

- **Importance of cross cultural training experiences** – these training workshops enable greater appreciation and understanding by both employers and co-employees of participants of indigenous culture.
- **Australian Government’s STEP Programme** – this program and the willingness of Government staff to allow its flexible application at the local level. Has been instrumental in securing employer cooperation.
- **Recognition of, and response to the range of barriers hindering indigenous mainstream employment** – the Sunraysia indigenous project has recognised that an integrated range of issues operate against mainstream employment by indigenous people. Such issues include negative peer group pressure, community and family obligations, poor literacy and numeracy, negative stereotyping, lack of driver’s license, lack of work experience, poor health, low self esteem and alcohol and drug abuse. The project works within these realities and seeks practical solutions. In particular, the Project Coordinator is known for his “*tough love mentoring*” of project participants.

CONSTRAINTS / SHORTCOMINGS

There is only one major constraint within the project model, and that relates to the dependence on the presence of a Government funding programme like STEP for funding

of support facilitators and initial wage subsidies. Without such funding support ,this community initiative would have struggled to achieve its community impact. Ultimately it is hoped that employers would engage and employ young Indigenous people because it makes good business sense rather than requiring any form of wage assistance.

REPLICABILITY

The project has certainly become a model for other regional communities in Australia. The former Minister for Workforce Participation, Dr Sharman Stone, whilst visiting the initiative, commented- *“this local programme is setting the pace for the rest of the country....given long term employment opportunities for Indigenous people are hard to come by in rural communities, this programme should not be a stand – alone blip – it has to be used as a model for other communities”* (Sunraysia Daily: 1)

The Project has international replicability in terms of –

- targeting disadvantaged minority people young people;
- mobilising local private sector contribution;
- responding holistically to employment barriers; and
- assembling a comprehensive support service including training, work experience, mentorship, cultural awareness training and job placement.

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