

WALKING IN TWO WORLDS

HELPING NEW ABORIGINAL STAFF GET COMFORTABLE AND PRODUCTIVE WORKING IN A LARGE GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENT

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In the first week we had a cake for morning tea and I spilt some crumbs on the floor and I said to the girl next to me, "Have we got a vacuum cleaner or something to pick up this?" And she said, "Right you need to dial extension 611 and then you record this on this on that, and you do ..."

I said, "oh for god's sake! I'll pick it up with my hands don't worry about it—it's too complex." That was my introduction into the bureaucracy and the processes and I thought that is just ridiculous. Just amazing.

New Aboriginal employee

In 2007 a large government department engaged Anecdote to facilitate a narrative-based process to help them improve the way they introduced new Aboriginal employees to their organisation. For many of these new Aboriginal staff members joining a large, bureaucratic government department was a culture shock and many chose to leave the department only after a relatively short period. Yet the department wanted to do a better job of attracting and retaining Aboriginal people and set out to create an Aboriginal staff induction program.

Guided by our brief we initially focused on Aboriginal staff induction. Quite early in the story collection and interview process, however, it became clear that a great many of the issues raised by both Aboriginal staff and their managers were issues common to all new starters, such as timesheets, flex-time, and knowing how to get things done. We therefore decided to focus on those things that were specific to their new Aboriginal staff and concentrated on looking at ways of getting them up and running as effectively as possible. The aim was for the department to improve their retention of Aboriginal staff and made it an attractive workplace for other Aboriginal staff to join.

THE PROJECT APPROACH

There were three phases over a six-month period: discovery, sensemaking and intervention design

DISCOVERY

The first phase of the project, which we call discovery, began by conducting informal interviews and anecdote circles with Aboriginal staff and their supervisors.

An anecdote circle resembles a focus group except that it is designed to elicit people's stories – their real life experiences – rather than their opinions or what they might think about a situation. The facilitator asks a limited number of open questions, which helps the participants recount real events. Most of the facilitator's time is spent listening and whenever someone offers an opinion they ask for an example.

By using anecdote circles we were able to overcome some of the limitations of the more traditional approaches, which typically presuppose a hypothesis and often only skims the surface of what's really happening. The stories told reflect the

realities of the workplace, reveal values and beliefs and generally, but not always, create an informal environment that encourages participation. Most importantly anecdote circles are an intervention in and of themselves. Once story collection starts, change is already underway because the participants are being affected by the stories they are hearing from their colleagues.

We chose narrative-based techniques because they are an effective way of revealing the complex, interconnected and unpredictable messiness that exists in organisations. We found them to be a particularly appropriate technique to use with Aboriginal staff, as story is common to the way Indigenous Australians have always communicated. It also lessens external influences, as the teller is communicating their direct experiences rather than opinions or possible solutions.

The narrative approach also helped us engage key people, including supervisors (the managers of staff), and in this case, gave them the opportunity to be involved from the beginning. This meant Aboriginal people and their supervisors had strong ownership of the project and helped get their commitment to future interventions.

SENSEMAKING

The next step was a sensemaking workshop where we provided an overview of what we had learned up to this point and introduced the participants to the stories we collected. The aim of this sensemaking workshop was to encourage the Aboriginal staff to decide for themselves what the key issues were.

The stories collected were printed one to a page and blue-tacked to the meeting room wall for the participants to read. A “gallery walk” of the stories provided the trigger for participants to have further conversations around the themes and patterns that they identified or that became apparent as they read. An activity was conducted that asked the question: “What can we do to help new Aboriginal staff get up to speed faster and feel comfortable in their role?” Much of what came from this activity guided us in developing the suggested activities and interventions we suggested to the department.

The workshop concluded with a “Pre-Mortem,” an activity that asks everyone to brainstorm anything that might cause the project to fail. Some very real roadblocks were identified in this activity and having them named and written down meant participants were aware and could prepare to deal with them if they should arise.

The department held a Pilot Induction Day towards the end of the project. It was an opportunity for us to develop possible approaches to use in a potential solution and present them on the day. This day allowed us to experiment with some of our ideas and gave us a clearer picture of the possibilities for any future programs.

On the day we provided an opportunity for participants to learn how to help people ask better questions when given a task and designed some scenarios to use in decision games that helped them to make better judgements. The decision games took particular problems seen in the stories from the anecdote circles and from the feedback we got on the day we believe that these are particularly appropriate and practical approaches for helping new Aboriginal staff in the department understand the problems they might face and some solutions that had worked for others.

Decision games

Decision games have been around in various forms for a long time. Chinese philosophers, most notably Lao –Tzu and Confucius, developed an active learning methodology where a member of a study group would present a paradox in the form of a parable. The group would then discuss it and explore possible resolutions.

Real life experience is hard to beat but in the real world sometimes you don’t get the opportunity. And it may be that we can’t afford to learn from our mistakes. Decision games can help in three ways:

1. Identify and understand the decision requirements of a job
2. Practice making difficult decisions in context and
3. Review the decision making experience.

Decision games are given a name, some background, a narrative description of the scenario itself and usually some sort of visual representation. They are stories that build to a climax and a dilemma. The actual decision is less important than the thinking that goes into it. It's merely a device to trigger the decision making process and allow the group to talk about it and transfer their knowledge. It is important to note that there is never a right or wrong answer

Decision games are not just limited to what decisions might be made. They can ask participants what information might be needed, what questions they should ask, how they would assess the situation, what problems they might anticipate, what they would expect to happen in the future or what guidance they would offer. These are all ways that people in a group can share what they know.

INTERVENTION DESIGN

The ideas that would help new Aboriginal staff get up to speed faster and feel comfortable in their role in the department were developed during the sensemaking workshop. These ideas were then incorporated into the suggested interventions.

There were four major themes that arose from our interviews, anecdote circles and sensemaking session:

- Walking in two worlds—the difficulty of balancing Aboriginal staff's community and department obligations
- Connections—finding and connecting with other Aboriginal staff, their work team, their manager in a large and sometimes anonymous bureaucracy
- Confidence—to ask questions, to negotiate positions
- Aboriginal politics—including getting even, non-Victorian Aboriginals and internal conflict

Our report recommended that Aboriginal staff don't need a tailor made induction programs so much as they need to attend the department-wide induction program followed up by a program of activities and support mechanisms that recognise the unique challenges faced by Aboriginal employees within the department and helps them to get comfortable at work in order to quickly become productive workers.

It was also clear that managers of Aboriginal workers had an equally important role to play in achieving the objective of happy, productive Aboriginal workers. Consequently, any intervention needed equal effort to help managers achieve this goal.

We developed a program of activities that was in two parts

1. A timeline of activities, tasks and experiences coordinated by the Human Resources Branch over a twelve month period for both Aboriginal workers and their managers.
2. Support for the existing Aboriginal staff forum in helping new Aboriginal staff get connected, solve problems and have a place to have conversations that new staff might feel uncomfortable having with their managers or immediate colleagues. This support would involve helping the forum get more solidly established within the department and providing ongoing support.

One of the questions we asked in the discovery phases was, "How long after starting here did you feel you really knew the organisation and job you were doing?" Most people had told us it took them 12-18 months to really feel on top on things. Getting productive at work needs to be a gradual process that unfolds

over time as new starters experience the organisation they've joined. They can't begin to take in what they need to know upon arrival. They need a slower and longer-term approach, one that better balances intellectual and emotional learning.

Consequently we proposed that the department adopt a program of activities that coincided with the natural cycles of time and the time cycles of the department. In this case, there were activities scheduled for new starters and managers before they started, in the first hour, the first day, the first week, the first month, the first quarter, the first six months and the first year.

These activities were designed to begin as soon as the hiring decision was made. An Aboriginal Employment Co-ordinator contacts the new employee congratulating them and welcoming them with some introductory information about what they can expect in relation to being an Aboriginal worker in the department.

The Aboriginal Employment Co-ordinator contacts the new hire's manager to plan the important conversations the manager should have with that new starter in their first hour, day and week.

It is in the first hour of a new job that you have the newcomer's full attention and it is best used to convey a single, important idea - the one thing an Aboriginal worker should know and take to heart in order to be happy and productive in this workplace.

From our investigations we believed the critical point was taking on the responsibility of being a proud representative of the department whenever they are on government business and to be aware of the pressures and potential conflicts that might arise from being both a department employee serving their Aboriginal community and being an Aboriginal community member.

Spending time with the new starter in their first day is the most important activity a manager can do

The first hour for the manager should also be a time when they reflect on the fact that everyone is different and the importance of suspending any prejudices they might have and opening their mind to learning about and from their new employee.

The first day is about **conveying the ethos** of the department. What does it mean to be part of this community and to be a good public servant? What is the department is endeavouring to achieve in the section, branch and division? Conveying ethos should be done through telling stories of how other people have acted under pressure that showed their true, shining character.

Then apart from the typical things required on a new starter's first day, such as the basics of survival, security passes, floor plan, toilets, colleagues, managers, etc., it was clear an Aboriginal worker would benefit from the following:

- Knowing **who else is an Aboriginal person** in the vicinity
- **Having a buddy** assigned to them who could show them around and answer the myriad of questions a new starter might have that they don't want to bother their manager with
- **Knowing about the support network** and extending the invitation to be involved in the network activities regardless of being an identified position or not.
- Receiving a **learning journal** and encouragement to reflect on and record their experiences. What was easy, hard, embarrassing, encouraging, worthwhile etc.?
- Meeting the Aboriginal Employment Co-ordinator and finding out what he can do to help them settle in.

One activity designed to encourage the new starter to reach out and begin building new connections is a **social network treasure hunt**. Start by giving them a set of categories of people to find such as: an Aboriginal Project Offer with more than 10 years experience, an Aboriginal person who used to work in an operational role in the community and is now working on site, an Aboriginal employee is also an Elder, and ask them to gather stories from these people. You don't give them names, they have to ask questions and develop social networks to find them. Once they have gathered those stories they can reflect on what they learned and record their thoughts in their learning journal.

This is an activity that can be done during lunchtime or quiet times at work so it does not impact too much on workload. Initial contact could be done using email or by asking the support members to point them in the right direction and arranging to meet for a quick coffee before or after work.

It is a way of providing an opportunity for new starters to hear some of the stories that clearly relate what their new workplace is all about. This allows them to participate in conversations that help them pull together their own story, the experiences of others and place them into a context that they can more easily use to understand their new work environment.

In addition, they are being given an opportunity to begin building their own social networks that have been previously identified as being so important by Aboriginal staff.

The new starter should **update the online people directory** with a blurb about who they are, what they have done in the past and include a photo so people will recognise them in the corridor.

Starting a new job should be a celebration. It's important that their new team **organise a lunch or morning or afternoon tea or develop their own rituals** to welcome the new starter and introduce them to others.

LESSONS LEARNT

Projects such as this are ever evolving. They are not something that is likely to have a clearly defined start and finish point. The benefits gained are sustainable over the long term if the organisation is prepared to continue working on its interventions and is willing to try new things without the certainty that they will work first time or every time.

This project was, by design, highly participative. It was important from the outset to get as many people who care about this issue involved in its design. We believe we achieved this aim. However high participation also creates high expectations and there was a clear expectation that the new ideas would be visible in the department in the near future. A delay in the implementation would severely damage trust in the process.

This is a project that can be replicated with other groups looking to become employers of choice, to attract new talent to their organisation or to improve the retention of the talent they already have.

A project of this kind creates a real opportunity to be different. Few other employers have developed systematic programs that nurture new Aboriginal workers in the way we proposed. Most adopt a traditional induction model focussed on information delivery sessions. This government department has the opportunity to lead the way in developing best practice that would really make a difference to their Aboriginal workers.

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