Imagine the Future by Learning from the Past - Aboriginal Employment Strategy: working together

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Dick Estens

Cotton grower & community innovator, recognised for his work in Aboriginal employment around the NSW town of Moree

Thanks Rhonda and thanks everyone for coming, and I'd like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land.

I think we've got a Powerpoint presentation that'll get under way now – normally I just get up and talk but this time, because someone told me that Victorian people are more educated, I was going to get up and do a Powerpoint.

Although I have trouble working out what sort of football they play – to me it's a bit like aerial ping-pong. But here I am – a farmer from Moree.

I first got going in Aboriginal employment back in 1990, and one never quite works out where one'll end up in life and I never really expected to be working with Aboriginal people.

I got rung up by someone from the CES office to go on an Aboriginal employment program. We met for a couple of years, we didn't get too far – I got heavily lectured as being a cotton farmer on this committee. It wasn't until a young girl tapped me on the shoulder and said: "Mr Estens, I think you better get an employment strategy going in the cotton industry".

So away we went – that was in 1992, and it took us about five years – dealing with a different bureaucrat every six months – to get $100,000 to drive the program.

To give you a bit of snapshot on Moree – Moree is a town of about 11,000 people, and its 25% Aboriginal, which is pretty impacting. Since 1965, if you read a newspaper from Moree before that, you never saw the word "Aboriginal" mentioned.

But after the referendum, Aboriginal people were brought in off the edge of town, into Moree, and in a sense the town exploded – you know, huge social issues, crime issues; it really impacted on the growth of the town. You couldn't get bank managers in, schools in.

We had a range of bureaucrats in visiting and people were demanding change, people were demanding that Aboriginal people

leave. I moved to Moree full-time – I actually come from Gilgandra about 300km south – in 1978, and you got thinking about it after a while.

I lived in the middle of town and I think in the first 10 years of living in Moree my house was broken into nine or 10 times – it was pretty impacting on my wife. (But) we never had to buy a new video – that was always the first to go, that and cash. At least they didn't cart off your silver or paintings so it didn't worry me really!

But it really got me asking: "What's going on here?" Governments can't fix these problems, we have to fix it as a town. And I think what happens in Australia is that we tend to sit back a bit and wait for bureaucrats to deliver for us. That's really not the way to go – you have to build the fight in the town.

To give you a bit of a snapshot of what was happening in Moree, we'll flick to the next couple of slides [of the Powerpoint presentation] … these just show the types of headlines we were getting. It was rapidly becoming a boarded-up town.

I think on that "Shame List" one, I think in six out of eight crime categories Moree was in the top 50, and in three of the eight we were in the top 10.

It was nothing to get 50 or 60 Aboriginal people rampaging down the main street and the next morning you'd have 70 or 80 broken windows. The window repairman did a thriving business – not everyone suffered!

As we got going in the beginning in 1997 we had a street reclaimers committee formed and that ran for two or three years and dissolved. They tried to get me to go on that … and this group of people were out there going to publicly reclaim the street by having cameras and all sorts of issues.

The next one [slide] is when we had the new police commissioner – the Pommy one we had up there for a few years. You can see there that there was a town meeting and people were demanding he fix the problem.

We got going (with the employment program) and it was pretty tough going in the first year – I think it took a couple of months to get the first job. I remember it was about September that we had five or six people in jobs and an Aboriginal person that was driving them. I went down to see him one morning and he said: “Oh Dick, I’ve got real problems, they’re all missing!”

It was funny because I noticed my committee was all missing too so I thought we’d had it!

I said “Come on mate, its mentoring; we’ve got to go out and find them and get them back on the job.” And I remember by 3 o’clock that afternoon we had five of the six back on the job – I think the sixth guy might still be running – we never did find him.

But by the end of the year I was sort of sussing out the problem a bit and trying to get a handle on what was working and I knew one thing that underpinned the whole strategy – that was that you couldn’t pluck a kid out of a devastated community put them in a job and expect them to survive.

I knew I had to set about a program of building self-esteem in the whole community. I remember when we first got going the Aboriginal team were just putting anybody into any job. I said: “Geez, you can’t do this.”

I said: “What we’ve got to do is target the middle third of Aboriginal people.” It’s no use tackling the back-end of the community because it will not survive, kill our name and we’ll never get off first base anyway.

I had this idea that generally about 30% of Aboriginal people move through life fine; and I thought if we could get the middle third grouped up with the top end of the community it would essentially build a mandate to put peer pressure on the back end of the community to drive the whole community forward.

And I still get it today, people say to me: “Dick, if only we had Aboriginal leadership in our town and community, we could do more”.

And its one thing I shied away from right from the start because we in Australia tend to shaft our leaders whenever we can – we don't praise our politicians we try to bring them undone.

So it's about lifting your big middle class and that's essentially what drives Australia, so I thought I'd try the same tactics when working with Aboriginal people.

At the end of the first 12 months, I thought I'd ring up the local newspaper [flick to next slide in Powerpoint presentation] and get them to come down and have a look at what we were doing.

I said that we had a fairly successful program rolling and we had 13 Aboriginal people in jobs. I couldn't believe it – we got a great headline, first page, second page of the paper, we had Aboriginal people on tractors, working in the cotton-classing room as agronomists.

It had a real impact, and I think off the back of that, we picked up four or five jobs pretty quickly; getting the jobs has always been the issue – we have plenty of Aboriginal people for them.

And I got thinking about it – I thought: "Geez, this media's pretty powerful, we need to use it a bit more." So after that, every month or so, I tried to get a positive article in the paper to help drive our whole program.

And then I started thinking: "We have to pull Aboriginal people together more," because we had 32 organisations in town that were defending their own pot of money.

As well as that I had to work out ways every six months about how we could pull black and white together. So I decided to launch the strategy – that was the first good idea I had – about 18 months after we got it going, that was mid-98.

We had a big party, got my cotton mates to throw in 10 grand, we had it at the art gallery, brought in the Sydney media, had a big buzz up and issued certificates to every Aboriginal person who had a job.

Off the back of that, we got more jobs. I said: “This is working.” And another six months went by very quickly and this [next Powerpoint slide] is talking about getting the town moving and pulling the town together.

The six months went pretty quickly, so I was looking for something else to pull the town together, and I found Ray Martin visiting a local town – he was opening a highway in Narrabri – and I went down and talked to him about what we were doing and he was dead-keen to come up to Moree, with Moree’s previous reputation.

He came in and spent three days in the town with a film crew. And it really had an impact on the town because here was *A Current Affair* reporter doing a positive story on Moree rather than a negative one.

In the past at any time if the Sydney media wanted to do a racial beat-up, they always came to Moree, bought the kids a few drinks and got a few racist comments together to get things going.

It (Martin’s visit) had a huge impact. It never went to air until a year after it was shot … but it had a far greater impact that he was in the town than when the story eventually to air in 2000.

[Looking at the next slide] – That’s the sort of headline it brought. And getting these positive headlines, it was the process I went through. For the next three years, about six or seven times a year in Moree I was able to pull a positive headline.

After a while when you have a project that is trying to pull black and white together, every six months was coming around a bit too quick for me.

I met a guy called Peter Sjoquist who runs the Croc Festival – I think he’s also well-known for running some of the music festivals down around the capital cities, the Rock Eisteddfods.

So we set up a program in Moree but before we set it up, we took a group of 32 Aboriginal kids to Weipa, to give them the experience of a traditional community.

I remember we threw $5000 on the bus, and when it got up there we had to thousand on it halfway, and then another $5000 on the bus to get it back. I got one receipt from a Kentucky Fried Chicken for about $150 – I don't know where the rest of the money went!

But it was really interesting, I had a couple of Aboriginal people putting all these kids together and putting all this money on the bus, but I think we had only about $2 on the bus when it set sale.

But I said to Warren (one of the organisers) – "What about Ricky, why aren't we sending him through to Weipa, he's done a lot of work." He said: "Oh no, we can't send him through – he's a La Perouse black, its his mob that let Captain Cook land; if we send him up there they'll lynch him!"

But I think it was after about the third Croc Eisteddfod, you know I really worked hard at all our functions at the Moree Gallery to get Aboriginal people to attend it. We'd always get 50 or 60 – but they'd always be gathered up one end.

It was interesting, I think it was after the third year in 2001, I was doing a talk off stage – because what we'd do I get my cotton-growing mates to throw a function to pay for this one at the gallery – and I suddenly noticed that Aboriginal people were mixing with non-Aboriginal people.

And that had come about by putting people into jobs. By the end of the second year we had 44 in jobs, by the end of the third year we were holding – people holding jobs – up around 120. And it was starting to have a huge impact on the town.

You could see that the people of Moree were starting to realise that the whole program was working. And then I set about getting positive publicity for Moree nationally, and I think most of you people realise now that there has hardly been a negative word about the place in the last five or six years, which is good.

It was early 2002 we started to look at driving the program outside of Moree. We went into Tamworth – a town of 38 or 40,000 people – four times the size of Moree. There was no CDP in Tamworth and it

wasn't a local community area – the Aboriginal people that lived in Tamworth came in from other traditional areas.

The census said there was about 2,500 Aboriginal people in Tamworth and when we opened the doors, in the first six months over 600 people registered for employment. And that sort of shocked me a bit – if you divide 600 into 2500, and probably only 70 or 80% of the Aboriginal people in the town had registered with us – you couldn't see any black faces in the main street, and it just shows you the level of unemployment that was there.

In the first year we put about 130 people into jobs. Some other business in Tamworth nominated us as best new business for the Chamber of Commerce Business Awards. When you've got 450 people in the room and one small table of Aboriginal people, it had a huge impact.

And the office doesn't have a community committee around, it's just a business and they do it on their own over there. And the impacting thing we have – they're wearing coats and ties and visiting businesses and building relationships and matching other businesses on their own terms.

In 2003 somebody nominated us in the Prime Minister's Community Business (Partnership) Awards. We won in New South Wales and made it through to the final three for the country. It was one of those good moments that make it all worthwhile.

Last year, at the beginning of last year, the Dubbo City Council approached us to open an office in Dubbo. We did that, and once again in six months we had over 600 Aboriginal people registered.

And that's pretty impacting, you know, we don't work off Centrelink – we are a completely voluntary office and Aboriginal people come to us.

Probably the big difference between us and the Job Network providers – everyone that works in the AES is an Aboriginal community person, it's pretty impacting for the community and it builds the community.

We get a turnover in the office – and in Moree, which has a staff of five, over the last seven or eight years we've probably had about 40 Aboriginal people work in there with nearly a different manager every year.

But it really builds the community. And the ethos and the psychology (is) that the company goes out into the community and builds. What's happened in Moree in the life of the strategy we've probably put about 1000 Aboriginal people into jobs. You know, they've lost jobs, but they've really built off it, and we've taken the anger out of the community.

[Click to the next slide]

This just gives a breakdown – every job is fair game for us. Even if the mayor's job comes up we'll be going for it. It's about building the fight in the Aboriginal team.

We really concentrate on the Aboriginal male. He's the one that's been really devastated because we all know that the strengths come from the Aboriginal women in the community.

One thing that I learned when working with the Boomerang Football Team that got kicked out of the comp and I was trying to work out ways to keep the mob in reasonable check was that we started to train them into an Aboriginal security team.

And I really found that it worked really well and it built the Aboriginal male. Security is very important for Aboriginal people, so we now have a company working behind us and security is an important part of our program.

But it is not security that people expect – our security pushes back into an Aboriginal security and builds the community. We use peer pressure from the community to keep it all under control. They're not working as tools of the police.

[Referring to slide] I guess there's an idea of our security guys – they're in quality shirts with the Aboriginal Employment Strategy logo.

And there's our security team at Woolworths – it took me about a year to get a contract to look after the Woolies store. Woolworths, because it is the first point on entry in town as you come over the bridge, was suffering from high crime issues and they were having trouble bringing it under control.

When we finally got our aboriginal security team in there, which we start off with two and now we've dropped it back to one, it took us a while to get the right people and nut our way through to how we could have the impact.

And I was copping phone calls for the first six months – the manager was complaining that this wasn't working and this was going wrong and I said: "Just have patience, we're getting there."

The phone calls stopped. I let it go for about a month and a half and I went down there and had a yarn to the manage and he says: "Dick, the kids are gone, we're not having any problems anymore."

And it was the girl in the middle (of the photo in the Powerpoint display) that probably led the team that fixed it. She comes out of the Moree Mission, she and her brother are just quietly pushing that peer pressure back into the community.

As we're pushing people back into jobs we are able to get the community to understand that jobs are more important than their kids thieving out of Woolworths. And we had a big breakthrough.

One of the things we've got going really well now is we've got kids going into banks. John MacFarlane, who's another true-blue Victorian, visited us and said to me: "Look Dick, we employ a lot of indigenous people in our banks around the South Pacific but we do a really poor job in Australia. We'd like to work with you to see what you can do."

So every bank we can get in range from in New South Wales – and that's from Maitland to New England, to Goondiwindi back around to Bourke down to Mudgee, we've got kids in banks now.

It's really interesting – of our four traditional banks, none of them have a youth award as part of their wage structure. So as we start them off the banks are paying our kids $16 an hour for 1350 hours over two years. They go in at the end of Year 10 and work half their holidays.

But it's really impacting and it's the sort of job we go for all the time as a customer focussed one, customer service - like Woolworths and Coles.

And generally corporate Australia are really important to us because as we move forward with the whole company, if you take corporate Australia out of your main street, you've probably got 60 or 70% of your jobs coz your other jobs are left to small family businesses generally.

What we're doing with the whole company now is expanding it and setting up a whole network which corporate Australia can engage with and we can get a whole lot of outcomes right across the rest of the country.

We have a good run with a company like Coles – its interesting in the towns we operate in you can see that they've had a program that worked through Coles on how to work with indigenous people because we get good outcomes.

When we looked at a company like Woolworths even today we're having a really tougher outcome getting people to survive at Woolworths because there's a lot of ignorance coming off managers.

For those of you who have probably watched newspapers, you can see now that Woolies are now implementing a cultural awareness program, and I expect to get good outcomes through that in the future – not for the lack of heat we've had on them.

We have an indigenous business incubator we are building on the site.

Probably the important thing – and this is probably the important page of the whole lot – is that we have a real psychological game plan

underway where its about building self-esteem, its about getting a community bouncy so we can move it, its about, as it says, “we do not offer subsidies for employers employing Aboriginal people.”

Getting the government to pay subsidies when you employ an Aboriginal person lowers self-esteem. Everyone else in the business knows he is getting subsidised.

So the 450 jobs a year we’re getting off our three offices we don’t offer government subsidies because it kills self-esteem.

[Referring to next slide] There’s a snapshot of our staff wearing coats and ties out there visiting businesses and building relationships. We don’t just hunt for jobs because it is too easy to get evicted off the site; its about impacting positively on a community and stopping people as they’re in their busy part of their life for just 10 seconds and having that positive impact that really makes a difference.

[Questions]