Bridging difference: using leadership development to address challenges triggered by changes in land access and use in rural Australia

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Conflict about land access and use has become a burning issue for communities and industries in rural, regional and remote Australia. Issues such as control over the environment, respect for cultural values, economic viability, the nature of community, and quality of life are central to the health of communities. A critical factor in addressing the challenges that resource extraction poses in rural Australia is to establish respect and trust and an understanding of the needs and aspirations of all those who live and work in the area.

In recognition of the need to work from the basis of respect and trust, Blackwood Corporation (BWD), a start-up coal exploration company operating in central and outback Queensland, decided that it wanted to provide a legacy for the areas in which it is active by investing in their future. BWD decided that one of the most effective ways of doing so was to develop leadership capacity in all areas of importance to the local communities—agriculture, mining, Indigenous development, community resilience and environmental stewardship—in which it operates.

To progress this initiative, BWD partnered with the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation and provided resources to enable the Foundation to design and deliver a leadership development program (the Blackwood Corporation Leadership Capacity Building Program) for 15 local individuals from the Surat Basin and associated areas to enhance the level and quality of leadership on important issues. Participants were selected from agriculture, mining, Indigenous development, community resilience and environmental stewardship throughout Blackwood’s operational areas.

To ensure that the program had broad support and was working with the interests of all sectors, endorsements and letters of support were obtained from key groups including AgForce, the Queensland Resources Council, Association of Mining and Exploration companies, and from state-level Indigenous leader, Ron Weatherall, Deputy Director-General, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services.

This paper provides an overview of the Blackwood Leadership Legacy Program, which focused on personal development, industry and regional issues awareness and improving strategic thinking. It describes the participants, their interactions and their evaluation of the program and its outcomes. It assesses the success of the program against the key objectives, which were to assist participants to:

- deepen their understanding and appreciation of the respective importance of mining, agriculture, environment, Indigenous issues and community in, and for, rural Australia
- develop strong leadership and management skills, including persuasion and influence, negotiation, facilitation, media engagement, and project management
• develop greater self-awareness and adaptability in terms of leadership approach, behavioural responses, and interpersonal style
• provide practical solutions to ongoing regional land access and use
• foster ongoing relationships for peer support across sectors and regions.

The paper assesses the Blackwood Corporation Leadership Capacity Building Program model, its impact on participants, and its outcomes. It also addresses its potential for its use in other areas or future projects where the nurturing of collaborative relationships between stakeholders is central to a win-win future-focused outcome, that underpins the long-term future and resilience of the region.