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

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In some areas of rural, regional and remote Australia, resource extraction and the associated changes in land access and use is perceived as a threat despite the economic benefits it brings. In 2009–10, the mining industry was the fourth largest contributor to Australia’s gross domestic product contributing eight per cent to the nation’s coffers, paying a total of $16.8 billion in wages and salaries and generating $153.5 billion in sales and service income (Australian Bureau of Statistics Year Book Australia, 2012).

Given this fact alone, at this time in our country’s history, the resources extraction sector will continue to operate and is likely to grow. However, in many areas, the tensions surrounding the recent expansion of the industry are a lightning rod for concerns about the environment, economic viability, land use interests, quality of life, the nature of community, and cultural heritage. As this audience well knows, these matters are fundamental to the health of individuals and of communities.

The way power is used and the nature of engagement can make or break relationships between profit-focused corporate businesses and relatively powerless local interests. This has deep impacts on the health and wellbeing of affected communities and on their futures. This paper outlines a program which was developed and conducted in 2012 to address powerlessness and encourage authentic engagement between a mining exploration community and a geographic region in which it is active, as a way of building the understanding and collaborative relationships that are essential to positive outcomes and the future well-being of the region. The program, Bridging Difference, was developed and conducted by the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation (the Foundation) in the Surat Basin of Queensland in 2012.

Funding for its development and implementation was provided by Blackwood Corporation (BWD) a junior coal exploration company with many exploration tenements in central and outback Queensland. This support in itself brought to the fore matters of differential power, influence and potential conflicts of interest. When establishing the relationship with BWD the Foundation was cognisant of these dilemmas and the potential for bias and issues of power were considered seriously. The most practical way of dealing with these dynamics was to ensure that BWD was not involved in any way in the development of the curriculum, the syllabus or the delivery of the program.

The paper also describes the Foundation’s and BWD’s reasons for developing the program. It touches briefly on some research into the importance of power, trust and engagement to health and wellbeing and an Australian study which supports their findings. It describes the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation’s approach to leadership development and the philosophy, structure and delivery of the Bridging Difference program.

I will begin with a little background on the Foundation. It was formed 21 years ago to build capacity in rural, regional and remote Australia through the development and support of leaders engaged in community, industry, services, business and government. It is an apolitical organisation that is entirely funded by sponsorship and donations. Its goal is to produce ethical leaders who can effectively tackle complex change and leverage shifting social, economic and environmental conditions. Its goal is to improve the viability and resilience of Australia’s rural industries and communities through better leadership.

The Foundation has observed the social, environmental and cultural tensions associated with land-use change with concern. It wanted to work with a partner that was interested in innovative approaches to addressing them, so cold-call letters were sent to a list of mining companies. Blackwood Corporation responded. It was keen to: develop regional relationships based on sustainable, collaborative, future-
focused models; and, to work from a base of respect and trust in the areas it was operating. To demonstrate this intent, BWD wanted to provide a legacy for the areas in which it is actively exploring by investing in their future, regardless of whether it went ahead and established a working mine.

Following discussions, the Foundation and BWD agreed that a way to progress this goal was to develop leadership capacity in areas of importance to local communities including: land management and land ownership; environmental stewardship; community resilience; and, cultural heritage. BWD provided the resources to enable the Foundation to design and deliver the leadership development program, Bridging Difference, for 15 local individuals from the Surat Basin and associated areas to enhance the level and quality of leadership in this region.

So what did the Bridging Difference program need to address? Many public health studies show that lack of trust, powerlessness, environmental change and human distress have significant impacts on the health of individuals and communities. At the heart of the distress created by the expansion of Australia’s resource extraction industries is a sense of powerlessness. Decades ago, the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (World Health Organization: WHO, 1986) recognised empowerment as a key determinant of health. Defined as the ability of individuals and communities to exercise control over personal, social, economic and political matters in order to improve their situation (Israel et al., 1994), it is the product of meaningful participation. For participation to be meaningful it requires those who are most impacted by an issue to be actively involved in constructing solutions to the problem (Yamin, 2009). Participation needs to be authentic “… ensuring autonomy in decision-making, [a] sense of community and local bonding, and the psychological empowerment of the community members” (Yamin, 2009, p.5).

In bringing these notions to bear on a local example, a study undertaken in the Upper Hunter Valley of New South Wales (Connor et al., 2004) showed that perceived level of community empowerment significantly impacts upon human distress. The Upper Hunter has three coal-fired power stations and produces most of New South Wales’ coal and electricity. The expansion of the industry over the last three decades has almost doubled open-cut mining. It has involved farmland acquisition, and land clearing has affected the water table. Noise, dust pollution and land subsidence are also legacies of this activity. The distress expressed by Upper Hunter Valley residents is reported to be based on a changed sense of place, loss of well-being and sense of control, and perceived damage to the landscape, the community and to the cultural heritage of both indigenous and settler communities. The study shows that this distress is exacerbated by perceived indifference to these impacts and losses by industry interests and government agencies.

As we know, the Ottawa Charter (WHO 1986) also cites housing, income and employment as key determinants of health. Looking at the other side of the coin in the Hunter Valley, Stephen Galilee, CEO of the NSW Minerals Council, quoting a recent study undertaken by KPMG (Newcastle Herald, March 31, 2013), points out that mining communities in the Hunter are getting richer, have high rates of home ownership and low rates of unemployment. The study looked at nine of the country’s most significant mining regions and measured changing demographics using ABS and Census data taken between 2006 and 2011. The Hunter was better off than many communities with 70 per cent of residents owning their own homes, and seven per cent earning more than $2000 a week, a three per cent rise over five years. This highlights the economic benefits of mining, not just through direct job generation, but also across other sectors within the regional economy. Galilee noted that “According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, mining directly delivers 20,513 jobs in the Hunter, and it’s estimated that this generates over 71,000 indirect jobs in the region” (Newcastle Herald, March 31, 2013).

The recent parliamentary inquiry on the impact of fly-in fly-out workforces in mining communities (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Regional Australia, 2013) mirrors findings of a mixed bag of outcomes in areas where mining is active. While communities acknowledge the wealth that mining expansion and power generation bring, they see it as a two-edged sword that breeds deep
social divisions. Changes to the nature of the work-force, transitory populations, impacts on the rural lifestyle and mistrust between supporters and opponents of expansion invoke divisive tensions built on different economic, social and cultural values. When ones way of living is threatened, mistrust develops within and among those who feel powerless to avoid or manage the threat (Ross, Mirowsky & Pribesh, 2001). Goals are misinterpreted and the actions of others are seen as negative, self-serving, and unfair. When the local environment is also impacted the resulting sense of powerlessness and mistrust are magnified as the feeling that lives, communities and futures are being shaped by outside forces, reinforces these perceptions (Mirowsky and Ross 1989; Ross and Sastry 1999; Geis and Ross 1998).

In view of this background and the fact that mining will be active in this country for many years to come and can offer economic benefits to regions and communities, the critical issue in optimising outcomes is the relationships between all the stakeholders involved. Strong voices and effective leadership for all the concerned groups is crucial. So, when the Foundation set about developing the Bridging Difference program, our intent was to address the dynamics of power, trust and participation in the curriculum design, the syllabus and the delivery methodology.

Given the Foundation’s apolitical stance, we determined that we would conduct the program in a way that made no judgment on land use change and its environmental and social impacts, would present all perspectives, and focus on building the relationships and the capacity of all parties to have respectful debates about the issues and seek solutions that would work for their industries, communities and regions. This would model within the program, the way leadership and relationships needed to develop within the learning group and the Surat Basin. Thus the design and delivery methodology had to be structured to build trust, share power and enable participation. As these values are embedded within the Foundation’s leadership model, it was an approach we had used many times.

The Foundation’s leadership model is based on moving people from a 'conventional' approach to leadership (which can be summarised as a narrow, self-centred approach with a win/lose mentality characterised by the externalisation of blame) to a ‘post-conventional’ approach (Loevinger, 1976; Cook-Grueter, 1999 and Rooke & Torbert, 2005). Post conventional leaders are collaborative, ethical and creative. They are aware of an ever-changing environment and see connections and opportunities others do not. They work in a participatory way and strive to understand different mindsets and worldviews. They are future-focused and seek win-win solutions (Fitzpatrick, 2009). Our educational approach provides opportunities and learning experiences that assist participants to make shifts in their leadership thinking and to move from a conventional to a post conventional approach—a perfect fit for what needed to happen in the Bridging Difference program to develop the kind of leaders that Queensland’s Surat Basin needs.

To ensure that the program had broad support and was working with the interests of all concerned, consultation was undertaken with key groups including AgForce, the Queensland Resources Council, Association of Mining and Exploration companies, and with state-level Indigenous leader, Ron Weatherall, Deputy Director-General, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services. In the words of Todd Harrington, BWD’s CEO, this was to ensure that the initiative “passed the sniff test.” All these organisations provided endorsements and letters of support, thus providing acknowledgment of the collaborative intent underpinning the program.

Participants had to live and/or work in one of BWD’s operational areas. They were selected based on their background and demonstrated commitment to their region, industry or community and a willingness to collaborate on addressing the region’s issues. They came from very different backgrounds and included: a marine biologist; a mining and agriculture recruiter; a kindergarten association president; a community worker; two cattle property owners; a youth leader; three native title claimants; a coal seam gas and cotton policy officer; a stock horse breeder and mining environmental consultant; and, a business owner.
After 21 years of experience in the field, it is the Foundation’s view that the key to developing better leaders is to focus on three areas: personal effectiveness; ethics, values and social responsibility; and, thinking, conceptual and analytical skills (Fitzpatrick, 2009). These domains formed the framework for the *Bridging Difference* syllabus which was delivered in ways that accommodated the different literacy levels within the group and grounded the learning activities in real-life experiences that were engaging, challenging and relevant.

The syllabus enabled 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 program was made up of three sessions. The first was a five-day challenge-based residential session, with two subsequent three-day sessions designed to develop additional participant skills, expand thinking about their respective regions, and foster expanded networks throughout rural Australia. Although we were working with a diverse group with different backgrounds and world-views about mining they were united on one key issue: wanting the best for their region. This gave a starting point for developing trust which is essential to an effective learning environment and to the group’s capacity to work together after the program.

To fast track trust development, the Foundation uses challenge based learning, set in authentic environments—this is a hallmark of all of its programs. This pedagogic technique:

- quickly establishes equality
- draws on the diversity of strengths within the group
- develops deep, frank relationships
- cultivates a common language, group mythology and culture
- provides chaos and crisis in a safe environment that:
  - forces disequilibrium (out-of-comfort zone experiences which prompt review of an individual’s understanding of themselves or an issue)
  - facilitates projection (individuals project their insecurities or problems into an interaction or activity which can be recognised and explored)
  - shortens the learning cycle
  - encourages risk taking
  - leaves a kinaesthetic imprint (learning through the physical and emotional responses as well as the intellect)
  - enables meta-learning (learning of the group as an entity).
From the outset we knew that there would be challenges in group dynamics given the volatile nature of land access issues, and the diversity of stakeholder backgrounds and perspectives. Notwithstanding this, the group developed a good level of cohesion, mutual respect and understanding, despite some underlying tension which was based predominantly around personality rather than cultural or background clashes.

The program evaluation involved three elements:

- self-reflection; in-depth written feedback from participants collected after each session
- self-evaluation; a comparative analysis of a self-evaluation form completed at the start and finish of the program
- observation; facilitator observation and reflection after each session.

Based on the evaluation, the key outcomes of the Bridging Difference program were increased: self-awareness; awareness of complex inter-related systems and issues; respect and appreciation of diverse perspectives; and, skills development, particularly in communication, public speaking, strategic thinking, and negotiation.

Over the life of the program it was evident that participants were developing the skills and confidence which are essential to effective leadership. There was a positive shift in self-assessments across all the leadership dimensions addressed in the program. The participants reported that they had developed approaches and skills they could use in their own workplaces, businesses, and industry settings and recognised that the networks established within the group were important to their future roles and work.

Program activities encouraged the development of strong relationships between participants. The evaluation provided evidence of an increase in active listening and the consequent building of trust among people from different sectors and interest groups. All the participants acknowledged the broadening of their relationships as a critical and valuable outcome of the program. They were unanimous in the view that they had a much greater appreciation of the broader issues and the complexity involved in finding workable solutions. This was demonstrated in the way they interacted with one another, which increased in depth and positivity over the length of the program.

The major outcomes of Bridging Difference were participants’:

- increased self-awareness
- increased awareness of complex inter-related issues and systems
- increased respect and appreciation of diverse perspectives
- skills development, particularly in communication, public speaking, strategic thinking, and negotiation.

The Bridging Difference program provided learning experiences that: triggered personal growth; were complex and multi-faceted; offered exposure to other worldviews; were personally salient for the learners; were emotionally engaging; offered a high level of personal challenge; were interpersonal in nature; and, forced self-review and reflection.

Research (Fitzpatrick 2009) shows that such experiences improve leadership effectiveness and enhance the capacity for collaborative approaches to solutions in complex contexts. High calibre rural leaders create better industries and local businesses; stronger links between sectors and regions; more dynamic networks; innovation and development; and, robust rural communities. And isn’t that what we would all like to see?
Bridging Difference is hopefully just the first in a range of responses that will enable communities and interest groups to work through the complex changes facing rural Australia.

References


House of Representatives Standing Committee on Regional Australia, 2013. Cancer of the bush or salvation for our cities? Fly-in, fly-out and drive-in, drive-out workforce practices in Regional Australia, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.


