

## The Learning Circles of Lockhart River — Building Productive Partnerships

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### Abstract

This practical case study highlights innovation in community change, action and engagement, and in whole of government and community collaboration in a remote Indigenous community in Cape York, Queensland, Australia. This integrated engagement strategy uses multiple models of learning, engagement, leadership and change and has resulted in improved economic, social, spiritual and environmental outcomes for the community in a relatively short space of time.

Lockhart River is a community of about 800 Aboriginal people, located more than 780 kilometres north of Cairns on the eastern side of the Cape York Peninsula. The community is isolated by road for the wet season from December to May each year. People here experience huge economic and social disadvantage; for example, life expectancy in the Cape York communities is 20 years less than for white Australians. To address the issues associated with long-term disadvantaged people in the Lockhart River community, new social capital approaches to help the community and government learn and take action together were initiated and driven by the Government Champion, Mr Jim Varghese, through Learning Circles using the Three Frames management methodology. The work in Lockhart River has since been expanded to include a number of strategies to *build productive partnerships*, including the immersion of a community development strategist and mentor in the community and the development of the Lockhart River Community Plan by the Lockhart River Aboriginal Shire Council. The formation of the Learning Circles has been a key initiative to provide a mechanism for community and government to discuss ways forward for the community and will be a key point of discussion in this paper.

The Lockhart River *Building Productive Partnerships* approach is fundamentally different to the traditional government approach to dealing with the issues faced by Indigenous communities. The traditional approach has often started with a pre-determined solution that is based in good intentions, but 'cooked up' outside the community and at times based on a set of basic assumptions about what is wrong within the community and about what needs to be 'fixed'. These solutions are often 'one size fits all' and may include grants or funding packages that cannot be used for any other purpose which then restrict the community from responding to needs identified in and by the Lockhart River community. While significant funding has been delivered into Cape York communities to 'fix' the many difficult social and economic problems the communities face, there is little evidence that this funding has made a real difference. This traditional government way of thinking narrows the development of potential solutions to difficult problems leaves the balance of power with government and not the community and limits the creativity and confidence of people in Indigenous communities to do something about their situation.

The *Building Productive Partnerships* approach, and in particular the Learning Circles, represents the development of a true partnership between government, community and business, where there is mutual exchange of 'riches' and where all stakeholders are teachers as well as learners. Capability is being built not only in the community, but also in the people who work in government at local, regional, state and national level and who therefore influence community outcomes. This collaborative change strategy has been named the Building Productive Partnerships strategy and is focussed on building culture, capability, commitment and connections. It is a way to resource people to create a better world for themselves and their children — to thrive rather than just survive and to engage community members in building their future and life-force — 'puuya', in the traditional Kuuku Ya'u language. This is a work in progress, but early research shows there are many improvements and outcomes already, including:

- stronger collaboration and connections between government and community, as well as across government resulting in more integrated policy and service delivery
- increased community capability to collectively influence difficult policy, governance and service delivery issues, as well as participate in planning and decision-making
- renewed interest in issues of community and culture by community, government and business
- increased commitment from stakeholders and more 'energy' for innovation and action
- increased number of positive stories about how people's lives have changed, how they are taking more responsibility and achieving more than they ever imagined
- increased community leadership capability, resulting in the formation of new economic and social ventures, which previously floundered.

The stakeholders from state and Australian governments, the Lockhart River Aboriginal Shire Council (LRASC) and the Lockhart River community are facing many difficulties as they grapple with the implications of this new approach — their new roles, relationships and ways of learning and acting productively together. The Building Productive Partnerships strategy for Lockhart River has already been recognised by both the Lockhart River Aboriginal Shire Council and the community, as well as the state and Australian governments, as taking a different approach which is getting real results in the community.

### **Keywords**

Indigenous, engagement — community and government, community development, innovation, social capital infrastructure

### **Introduction and context**

Lockhart River is a very remote community of 800 Aboriginal people and is amongst the most disadvantaged communities in Australia. People experience significant economic and social issues resulting in diminished life expectancy of some 20 years less than the general Australian population. The community suffers the results of drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence, poor health and crime. There is little real employment, recreational or social opportunities within the community, which is essentially reliant on government grants for funding all activities. The Cape York Justice Study (2002) reports that despite the investment of over AUD\$127 million a year in Cape York communities, the wellbeing indicators and statistics (health, education, justice, economic and social development) continue to decline.

The community is 12 hours' drive along dirt roads from the nearest city and is isolated during the wet season from December to May each year. The traditional lands are extensive and cover approximately 354,072 hectares. Lockhart River was originally established in 1924 as a Church mission, bringing together people from five different traditional Aboriginal territories, with a number of different languages, who were not used to living together. Under the rules of the time, the people were not allowed to speak their language or to practise their cultural traditions and they were moved inland away from their sea country. The combination of these actions over many years has led to a loss of identity (Warby 1999; Thompson 1985) and has reduced the confidence and ability of individuals and the community to be empowered to create the future they really want for themselves and their children.

The Lockhart River community has taken an innovative approach to building a better future for the community through a focus on performance as well as strengthening the 'puuya' which, in Kuuku Ya'u, one of the traditional languages of the Lockhart River region, means 'life force' (Thompson 1988). Johnson Chippendale, the recently elected mayor of the Lockhart River Aboriginal Shire Council and chief executive officer (CEO), Peter Buckland, share a vision for an empowered, capable enterprising community, where people take personal responsibility for their actions. Their vision is 'to empower the community' and this is the theme of their Lockhart River Community Plan. This has developed from an innovative learning partnership over the past three years between the community and the state and Australian governments to establish a living community development plan. Jim Varghese, Director-General of the Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries (DPI&F) and Government Champion for Lockhart River, initiated this approach, and since 2004, he and Dr Warren Hoey, Director-General of the Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy (DATSIP) have been the major sponsors of this innovation in Lockhart River in collaboration with the council.

### **Strategy and associated interventions**

The Lockhart River Building Productive Partnerships approach is fundamentally different to the traditional government approach to dealing with the issues faced by Indigenous communities. The traditional approach has often started with a pre-determined solution that is based in good intentions, but 'cooked up' outside the community and, at times, based on a set of basic assumptions about what is wrong within the community and about what needs to be 'fixed' without reference to the community. These solutions are often 'one size fits all' and may include grants or funding packages that cannot be used for any other purpose, which then restrict the community from responding to needs identified in and by the Lockhart River Community. While significant funding has been delivered into Cape York communities to 'fix' the many difficult social and economic problems the communities face, there is little evidence that this funding has made a real difference. This traditional government way of thinking narrows the development of potential solutions to difficult problems, leaves the balance of power with government and not the community. It also limits the creativity and confidence of people in Lockhart River to do something about their situation and reduces their interest and need to take personal responsibility for creating change.

The Lockhart River Community Plan is being used as a guiding document with activities arising from the 'energy' and leadership potential in the community. Dr Warren Hoey acknowledges the effectiveness of this approach (Lockhart River Community Plan 2005):

“This Community Plan and the approach taken to develop it is different — it is a very personal picture of people’s stories, aspirations and what they want to do. I think working with people’s passions in this way will achieve sustainable results.”

No matter which group or individual is being worked with, the starting point is always the human 'life force' — people’s passions, motivation, good stories and what asserts (physical, environmental, social, economic and spiritual) they have to build on. Performance strategies emerge from the 'warm-up' of the community leaders, that is, what is important or motivating to them (Clayton 1993).

The aim of the Building Productive Partnerships strategy is to build community capacity and performance through a focus on:

- *culture*, which includes both traditional and contemporary culture and is a key element of individual and community identity (Schein 1992; Wheatley 1994)
- *capability*, which includes knowledge, skills, attitude and world view and can be developed through experience, mentoring, shadowing, education and/or training
- *commitment*, including engagement, motivation and confidence to take responsibility and to act to achieve results
- *connections*, which includes people getting in touch with themselves and their own life purpose, as well as building effective relationships with other people.

In this paper, six key activities that are contributing to improved outcomes in Lockhart River are explored. These are:

1. Government Champion
2. Learning Circles
3. Immersion of a mentor in the community
4. Community leadership development
5. Government and community engagement
6. Performance systems.

Each of these is further discussed below.

### **1. Government Champion**

In 2002, the Queensland Government introduced a strategy where each department CEO was assigned as Champion for an Aboriginal community across Queensland. Their role was to take a whole-of-government focus to improve outcomes in 'their' community, as prior to this government services and relationships were poorly coordinated and not achieving the optimal results for communities or government (Cape York Justice Study 2002). Three years ago the Lockhart River Aboriginal Shire Council initially rejected the idea of a 'Champion', because they did not own the idea and couldn't see any benefits for the community. However, after ongoing dialogue, using an approach to learning called the Three Frames (developed by Jim

Varghese), there is a partnership between the community and Government Champion, Jim Varghese, based on trust and respect. Jim and his team are considered a vital part of the way forward.

“We want to walk together with government, side by side in partnership, sharing responsibility for improving the living and working conditions for the people of Lockhart River. We are already getting good results working together with the State and Australian governments through our Learning Circles. We want to share responsibility and have changed our Council logo for this plan to show the hands of government, community and corporate clasped together.” (Mayor Johnson Chippendale, 2004)

This successful partnership has been developed through a deliberate focus on creating effective relationships between community and government leaders, at the same time as ensuring shared responsibility for performance and delivery of agreed actions initiated through Learning Circles. Jim Varghese (2004) explains “Over the past three years we have worked hard to develop a productive working relationship, and I think that we will continue to perform well together”. Jim Varghese has been a mentor and role model for community leaders and has also taken the opportunity to learn about community leadership from the Lockhart River leaders. This productive working relationship has been built at both professional and personal levels. For example, community leaders have challenged Jim about the way in which government usually engages with the community and he has challenged the council about their thinking, priorities and expectations of government. At a personal level Jim has agreed to teach community leaders about the cooking of his culture and to learn how to cook fish in a traditional Lockhart way from Kuuku Ya’u Elder, Lucy Hobson.

## **2. Learning Circles**

Since 2002, the Lockhart River Aboriginal Shire Council and community, state and Australian government partners have been participating in regular Learning Circles. Up to 80 people sit together in a circle and talk — identifying, dialoguing and actioning issues across many areas of concern including health, education, justice and economic development. Importantly it is the community who have identified these areas as priorities for discussion and action. Action plans that include shared responsibilities for community and government are developed at every Learning Circle, ensuring results in the community. At each Learning Circle the actions agreed to at the last Learning Circle are reviewed. Frank discussions are held between the community and government about progress, or lack of it and ways to keep moving forward. Achievements and milestones are celebrated as part of the Learning Circle.

This consistent focus on dialogue, listening, action and monitoring outcomes has contributed to productive relationships and improved outcomes in Lockhart River. A significant relationship of trust has developed over time between government and the community, as both sides demonstrate trustworthiness, celebrate the achievements, discuss problems openly and share responsibility for action. This has strengthened the relationship to the point where the community has developed confidence and is now taking a strong leadership role with the Learning Circles. That is, in the beginning the Government Champion led the facilitation of the Learning Circle, now the Mayor co-facilitates the process. As well, community leaders, who were previously less confident, now speak out more and are not afraid to ask government representatives to leave if they want to discuss issues privately with elders.

This strengthened leadership action is a good indicator of the strategic success and community ownership of the Learning Circles as a change intervention. Recognition for this innovative approach and the outcomes achieved in Lockhart River has come from the Australian and state governments, Lockhart River Aboriginal Shire Council and the wider Australian community. Further indicators of the development of leadership and confidence in the Lockhart River community are also seen in the management of the Learning Circles. In the beginning, government staff did most of the preparation and assumed the leadership for the Learning Circles with input from community leaders. Understandably, the community did not own the process — from their perspective this was yet another of those ‘great ideas’ imposed from outside. The whole idea of Government Champions and Negotiation Tables (Learning Circles) belonged to someone else.

“The first Learning Circle was run dragging the community leaders along and they did nothing unless it was hand fed to them, no food, no chairs, nothing — they were not reluctant but rather exhausted with constant government demands and hollow promises — they had heard it all before and knew that nothing real or useful to them was going to happen. However, with small tangible promises kept and relationships built over time, small incremental changes started to occur. (Government worker)

Learning Circles were originally held in the church hall using computers, whiteboards and paper. Now, weather permitting, the Learning Circle is a two day camp at an outstation on the traditional lands of one of the clans, with computers still in use for practical purposes, but with the background of country. This has improved the creativity of responses from all participants and recognises the strong cultural connection of the Aboriginal people to their traditional land and sea country. This has been another important step towards ‘empowering the community’, and has assisted community members to strengthen their own sense of identity.

Since the beginning, Learning Circles have been informed by the Three Frames process — “building effective relationships to drive excellent performance and alignment” (Varghese 2001). The processes used in Learning Circles are now used in other gatherings in the community, and are the basis for building new social and learning infrastructure in Lockhart River. For example, the women had no active group in Lockhart River and now, with some assistance, they have held a number of Women’s Learning Circles, which have mirrored the Learning Circle approach. Following this example, the community has also established the Men’s Group and a Youth Committee to share responsibility and leadership in the community.

Over time, the emphasis in the Learning Circles has shifted from focussing on urgent and important issues ‘coming from the floor on the day’, to a discussion about priorities for the next four years, based around the community plan priorities and at a strategy level. This area of learning — around planning, performance and strategy — is mostly new for the community leaders, and the council members have enthusiastically taken up the challenge to learn new ways. Government leaders have also increasingly demonstrated their commitment to learning more of the culture and traditions of the Lockhart River people. Both community

and government leaders have had to learn and adapt their behaviours, as the Learning Circle process has evolved.

Learning Circles are not just 'events'. There is a lot of ongoing work in between the Learning Circles to ensure the conversations continue and actions are completed. John Adams, from the Cape York Strategy Unit (CYSU), DATSIP, in Cairns has worked tirelessly to prepare government and community for the Learning Circles. John, together with Maureen Liddy, CYSU coordinator, have provided leadership to assist state government agencies to work together. Marian Pettit and Hilary Riggs from the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR), and more recently Jane Whyte and Kim Werner, have played similarly valuable roles on behalf of the Australian Government through the Indigenous Co-ordination Centre (ICC) based in Cairns. As Mayor Johnson Chippendale, in an open letter to the Australian and state governments prior to the March, 2005 Learning Circle, explains "At the moment it is very hard for us to navigate the maze of funding bodies and rules to action our Community Plan. The rules are too rigid and there are too many departments." The actions of the government agencies and people involved in the Building Productive Partnerships strategy have gone a long way toward creating shared responsibility for addressing these issues. However, larger public sector reform is needed in this area.

### **3. Immersion of mentor in community**

One of the most successful partnership strategies has been the involvement of a senior public servant, Denise Hagan, Executive Director, Community Development for the Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy, who has been living and working in the community since the beginning of 2004. This strategy emerged from one of the early Learning Circles, where the Lockhart River Aboriginal Shire Council identified that they wanted assistance with their leadership and planning — and they specifically asked for Denise to come and work in their community. She had been co-facilitating the Learning Circles with Jim Varghese since their inception, and therefore had been making shorter visits to Lockhart River community regularly for a couple of years.

This immersion in the community by a person with significant senior executive experience as a policy developer as well as a change and community development strategist, has provided benefits to government in learning more about the community's needs directly, and in terms of identifying innovative approaches to change and capability building. There are also direct benefits to the community through bringing a new approach to the social, health and economic challenges the community faces.

This aspect of the Building Productive Partnerships strategy is a completely new approach, as it is believed that previously no one with this level of experience or seniority in government has lived in an Aboriginal community and really become part of the community. The usual approach is to have 'fly in-fly out' visits of one or two days, which has had limited success, as the relationships built in this way do not sit comfortably with community cultural norms. As well, there has never been a focus on building the leadership, life-force, culture and identity of the community in a way that builds ownership and really engages individuals in taking more responsibility for their own journey. Often the development of physical infrastructure is given more funding and attention, as it is easier to point to a tangible outcome, whereas the building of capability and

human life force can be harder to justify in a bureaucratic, rational world. Yet, from the Lockhart River experience, it is here that the critical success factor lies.

Denise and CEO Peter Buckland both use a mentoring model of working with community leaders in real time on real leadership and management tasks. This has been a highly effective way of building the capacity of local leaders in Lockhart River. This highly intensive engagement involves being a role model, coach, counsellor and fellow learner. The development of new progressive leadership roles is achieved by daily 'walking alongside' community leaders. The learning is done with real situations and experientially in action, with a key example being the development of the Lockhart River Community Plan by Denise, CEO and the council. The mentor models interpersonal, strategic, and thinking skills and uses a learning model called double loop learning so that every interaction builds learning and capability — the expertise does not just stay with the mentor (Stacey 2000).

"I knew I had leadership in me, but she (Denise) showed me the way forward. I have never had that help before. Today I am really focussed on how to help my whole community — that's something she has shown me. She has mentored and shown me, and many others in our community that they had something special in them, from youth to Councillors and Elders. She helped them see it and gave them a push. Then they could see what they had in them and could lead better and be more motivated. She has helped us express our ideas, so that government understands what we do."

(Mayor Johnson Chippendale, 2004)

Dottie Hobson, Lockhart River Councillor and Kuuku Ya'u Elder describes Denise as a 'go-between' — a trusted communicator between community and government. Denise also acts as a 'translator' and describes the community plan as a tool to help community and government understand each other better. One of her learnings has been that although both community and government speak English — very different meanings are attached to the words spoken. She observed that in many meetings, both parties went away thinking they were in agreement, but in reality they had very different understandings of both the process and the outcomes. This of course is not limited to this situation. Denise then assists the players to 'see' the differences and to work together to develop a common understanding and agreed actions.

Denise has started writing 'translations' of community meaning into 'government language'. She does this tentatively and in collaboration with local leaders, as she does not speak any of the local languages, but from being immersed in the community has endeavoured to write about that which is often not said. For example, when community members say their priority is 'getting back to country', this is shorthand or symbolic of a much deeper meaning, which goes something like this:

"We want to spend more time with our families on our traditional land and sea country, as we feel more empowered then, living off the land in our traditional ways, respecting our culture. We also want to develop our outstations and improve access to them by road and sea, for our families and also for tourists — that could create some real jobs. We want to learn and teach in that environment, as we feel more creative and energised there, connected to our culture and to ourselves. We think that this will help our young

people stay out of trouble, to value their culture and strengthen their identity. We want to have choices to live a traditional life and/or a contemporary one. Some of us have big visions for creating business enterprises on our homelands, such as oyster farms, tourism business and youth programs — for example, Angkum, Garraway and Wuthathi. We are prepared to manage our traditional areas the way our ancestors taught us and work in with government agencies to develop plans for managing our natural resources. Many of us, including Kaanju, Umpila and Uutaalnganu, just want some sheet iron, a water tank and some timber, so that we can build some very basic shelters. Then we can be there on our country some of the time, not always on another man's land, which is hard for us. We are happiest on our traditional lands.”

Often the interpretation of someone from outside of the community of 'getting back to country' misses the importance of these four words to Indigenous people's identity and wellbeing. This then affects their motivation to work and to learn. Boredom and 'having nothing to do' has led many to the escape afforded by drugs and alcohol. As well there is often a belief by government workers that whole new towns with all the services will need to be established, which isn't actually what locals are trying to communicate. Unfortunately neither side has been very skilled at seeing, hearing or feeling events from someone else's viewpoint, including their values, beliefs and emotions — really being in their shoes or bare feet. (DeLozier and Grinder 1987). This is one of the capabilities that both government and community leaders need to strengthen, in order to accelerate and sustain progress in the Lockhart River community.

#### **4. Community Leadership Development**

The community leadership development strategy in Lockhart River is aimed at strengthening the leadership capability of individual community and government leaders, as well as building relationships between leaders both within and outside the community. There is a deliberate strategy to enhance the networks of local leaders so that they can access and share knowledge, as well as acting collaboratively to make a difference in the community. Several councillors, community leaders and public servants (school principal, police sergeant and director of nursing) have participated in regional and national leadership programs. One of these programs, the Cape York Strategic Leaders Program 2003 (CYSL) was the first of its kind in Australia and brings together Indigenous community leaders, public servants working in ten different Aboriginal communities and policy makers on a leadership program. This innovative program has been sponsored by the Queensland and Australian governments.

The Cape York Strategic Leaders Program was based on the very successful leadership development model used in the Queensland Public Service since 1997. Research undertaken after more than 1200 senior managers had completed the program, showed that 85 per cent of survey respondents (329) reported improved leadership styles, ability to communicate with influence and improved ability to work strategically. This leadership development approach has been used successfully for more than eight years as the basis of developing the leadership skills of more than 3500 public sector managers (Martin 2005, p. 15).

This program was a finalist in the Queensland Premier's Awards in 2003, and the 2005 evaluation of CYSL2 (Martin 2005, p. 4) concluded that:

"There is significant evidence that CYSL2 is having a positive impact on community outcomes, individual leadership capability and cross agency collaboration. This outcome also reflects the findings of the evaluation of the first CYSL program" (Dick 2003).

## **5. Government engagement and community engagement**

The emphasis over recent years in government policy has been on 'community engagement' and 'community capacity building'. In Lockhart River these policies are being brought to life. For this community, the focus is on government engagement as well as community engagement. The same applies to capacity building. Capacity building has to be happening within government as well as within community. In Lockhart River, the focus is on developing each of the partners, as well as on the relationship between the community and government leaders. This approach is needed if shared responsibility, reconciliation and productive partnerships, resulting in improved lives for Indigenous communities, are to be achieved. The strategy to date has also recognised that working with the positive things that are happening in the community creates better outcomes than continually reinforcing the negative aspects of community life. It also reflects Australian and Queensland government policy of using community engagement, good governance, better performance, stronger accountability and shared responsibility as the basis of moving forward.

## **6. Performance systems**

Improving governance, planning and performance systems is a further strategy of the Lockhart River Aboriginal Shire Council and the Building Productive Partnerships strategy. The council recognises that these systems, along with the community capacity building strategies outlined above, will deliver better outcomes for the community. Without the combination of good management systems and community capacity building, delivering outcomes is much more difficult. Improvement of these systems is being led by council CEO, Peter Buckland, who has extensive experience in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and in coaching community leaders in these systems. He is very much accepted by the community, and is therefore able to teach and mentor leaders on a daily basis in a way that others cannot. He is achieving significant outcomes, with councillors and CDEP leaders demonstrating enhanced accountability, planning and management behaviours as a direct result of his mentoring and teaching. He has improved their understanding and actions relating to governance and performance in very practical ways. This depth of understanding of what's required to move forward in communities and the accountability requirements of government has been an essential part of the council's move to a performance culture. This is particularly challenging in Aboriginal communities where literacy levels and understanding of accountability and performance processes is generally much lower than in other Australian communities.

## **Results to date**

This innovative 21st century strategy has had positive, tangible results in the community, including improvements in integrated service delivery and policy, the establishment of social capital infrastructure,

improved collaborative relationships between community and government and improved economic development opportunities. Some examples of results to date include:

- The development of the Lockhart River Shared Responsibility Agreement, which highlights areas of agreement between the Lockhart River Council, the community, the Australian Government and the Queensland Government, with all partners sharing responsibility for moving forward. This innovative agreement was the first completed in Australia and has been used as a model by other communities.
- The establishment of the Puchiwu Fishing Company, which will result in improved economic and social outcomes. The community has been talked about this for 15–20 years but has not taken any action previously. Now a board has been established and the business structure has been agreed by clan elders. A new partnership model facilitated this development and included people from the council, the community and a number of Australian and state government agencies, with special mentoring from the Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries.
- The development of Lockhart River Community Plan 2004–2008, which outlines the community priorities across key portfolio areas including Health, Education, Training and Employment, and Justice and will be used as the basis for ongoing shared responsibility and performance agreements between government and community. This is only the second plan for the community, and the first time that the process has really engaged the council and leaders in the community, thereby ensuring that the plan has a real chance of being implemented, to be a 'living' document, not just one that sits on the shelf. The development of the plan was one of the first actions agreed to by the community and government at an early Learning Circle.
- The formation of new social capital infrastructure, including the Women's Learning Circle, the Men's group and Health Action Group, where key strategies and leadership can be developed. When this strategy commenced, none of these groups were functioning.
- The renewed community spirit and interest in traditional cultural activities, including dance, drums, spear making, art and basket weaving — all critically important to strengthening cultural identity and life force, which in turn form the basis for productive lives
- The establishment of the first small business in Lockhart River — 'Don's Mowing Service', by the deputy mayor, Paddy Creek, who knows the importance of being a role model and about the need for entrepreneurship in the community
- There is renewed enthusiasm in the community for dealing with challenges, as well as a reduction in conflict and criticism — the approaches in use have supported community members to speak up in meetings, in being clear about who will take what actions as an outcome of the meetings. The community renewal is evident in the way the Lockhart River Aboriginal Shire Council and the Community Justice Group are empowering the community and encouraging people to put forward their ideas.
- The community's renewal and emergence into wellbeing is also being seen in the way in which drug and alcohol issues are addressed. Instead of bringing an outside 'fly in-fly out expert', community members have been employed and are being trained to organise diversionary activities.
- The council and community leaders see that the relationships built are productive and useful to them achieving their vision, and see this as a critical success factor — which is a turnaround from the somewhat passive, non-productive relationships of the past

- Significant improvements in people's pride in their town; for example, visitors compliment the CDEP (Community Development Employment Program) workers on: (a) the newly mowed parks and footpaths, as well as cleared roadways: (b) a fence that has recently been built to keep the horses and cattle out of town, where they were constantly knocking over rubbish bins causing health concerns; (c) the four new shelter sheds at the beach for family and community activities, where before there was only one in a poor state of repair for a number of years; and (d) their active contribution to preparing for and managing the recent emergencies, including Cyclone Ingrid and the plane crash, where 15 people recently died just north of Lockhart River. The Queensland Police Service and State Emergency Services leaders publicly complimented the council and community on their involvement — recognising a renewed and strengthened community spirit.
- Minister Henry Palaszczuk recently attended the Learning Circle in Lockhart River — he and other government leaders complimented the council on their shared leadership, their vision and outcomes in their community plan, and the way they were able to articulate their ideas to community and government. The council also honoured their own languages and traditions in new ways at the Learning Circle — all indicators of strengthened leadership ability and the development of new roles.

### **Theoretical foundations**

This integrated strategy uses multiple models of learning, performance, engagement, leadership and change and has resulted in improved economic, social, spiritual and environmental outcomes for Lockhart River community in a relatively short space of time.

A sophisticated approach is being used to address the very complex and intractable problems the community faces — from the outside the strategies embedded in the Building Productive Partnerships strategy may appear 'simple'. However, this is a multi-layered approach, using many different methodologies and theoretical frameworks. The theoretical foundations and approaches in use include systems thinking (Mckenzie and Bawden 1999), appreciative enquiry (Hammond 1996), Three Frames (Varghese 2001), storytelling (Green 2002), change, mediation, counselling, action methods, conversation mapping (Mckenzie and Bawden 1999), leadership, culture change (Schein 1992), planning, psychodrama (Clayton 1993), sociodrama (Moreno 1993) and community engagement (Wenger 1998). The rational as well as the non-rational (beliefs, values identity) (Wheatley 1994) are considered, hence the focus on performance as well as human life force. Some of these are discussed further on.

Systems thinking approaches are fundamental to this strategy in Lockhart River. In order to maximise the results in Indigenous communities, more systems thinking approaches are needed throughout the system — locally to nationally. Many government workers are still using old approaches like establishing committees and/or bringing people outside the community in, assessing the problem, solving it outside the community and presenting the solution back to the community for implementation. This linear approach tends to focus on 'one right answer' and often has a poor track record of inspiring people into action. So there may be a 'quality idea', but with low acceptance or engagement of those whom it will affect, which results in poor implementation. This is one of the major reasons why so many plans, guidelines and policy documents never result in the community improvements they were designed to achieve. There has been

an over-emphasis on the structures and processes required by governments, as opposed to the aspects of identity, values, beliefs and life-force of communities (Wheatley 1994).

We are part of a world today of complex interconnectivities of information, ideas, economies and people. In this world of discontinuous change, decision-making needs to be holistic and not linear and needs to take account of the important impact of people, networks and relationships (Mckenzie and Bawden 1999). The significant issues facing Indigenous communities and governments will not be addressed through the old ways — doing what we have always done and expecting different results is not sound. Transformational changes are required and the ways forward need to be co-created by stakeholders from all parts of the system — from government ministers to Traditional Owners, and representatives of all the groups and organisations in between. This recognises the complexity of the issues involved and takes account of the best ideas from all stakeholders — thereby engaging their hearts and minds, which inevitably leads to action and changed behaviours. Systems mapping approaches are particularly helpful here.

One of the foundations of the Lockhart River strategy is the management process developed by the Government Champion, Mr Jim Varghese. This management process is called the Three Frames, and has been used successfully over the past few years in a number of departments to implement major change processes. The Three Frames indicates the areas that organisations and communities have to focus attention on to ensure high levels of performance through:

- building a safe, authentic and rich environment for interaction and the exchange and expression of views, beliefs and feelings — with relationships that are based on respect and trust
- monitoring the effectiveness of the organisation's performance in four key areas: financial delivery; teaching and learning outcomes; relationships with stakeholders; and learning and development
- alignment of the structure, people and systems within the organisation and the emotions, intellect and values of individuals through identifying any blockages to performance and identifying enabling strategies to overcome these blockages. (Building effective relationships to drive excellent performance and alignment — *Three Frames Workbook* 2001.)

An appreciative inquiry approach is another fundamental way of thinking, speaking and acting in use in this innovation in Lockhart River. This is based in thinking that espouses doing more of what works and building on people's motivations, as opposed to a problem-solving focus, i.e. doing less of what we do not do well (Hammond 1996). Words are chosen very carefully, as language creates our reality. So the language of deficit is avoided, e.g. dysfunctional, stress, addiction and problem. Instead what we are trying to create is a focus on the positive, whilst still acknowledging the reality of the difficulties the community faces. In the community plan, each of the ten portfolio areas has an aim written in positive, conversational language. For example, the aim for Health and Well-Being is "we are healthy and well" and the aim for Youth is "confident motivated youth". Focussing on these positive aspirational statements helps to create a new reality in the community. Also, by focussing on the positive parts of their past, people have more confidence and comfort to create a better future. Using an appreciative approach touches something important and positive in people and they respond with heartfelt answers rather than the politically correct ones.

## **Next steps**

This is a work in progress, and following are some of the emergent next steps in Lockhart River: 1) Teaching Learning Circles; 2) Reducing Red Tape; 3) Real Jobs with Real Learning; and 4) Research.

### **1. Teaching Learning Circles**

Teaching Learning Circles have been developed by Denise Hagan and are a progression from the original Learning Circles, which have been focussed across the entire range of whole of community and whole-of-government issues. These Learning Circles will continue on for as long as community and government leaders find them useful. Teaching Learning Circles are an additional strategy to build social capital, as the basis for an enterprising and empowered community. They will focus on a specific area of interest; for example, women and families or economic development. Their purpose is to progress the implementation of the community plan, through a process where both locals and visitors teach and learn, as well as jointly identify issues and co-create solutions. Teaching Learning Circles will be led from the community, and government and other people will be invited to join with the community in conversations to develop shared understanding of the future, the past and the present and to plan joint action around particular topics or portfolio areas of the community plan.

Community leaders will be mentored and encouraged to teach, government leaders will also be expected to teach and both will need to learn new skills together. Teaching Learning Circles will allow both community and government to be learners as well as teachers, which will change the relationship to one of shared leadership, as opposed to the current power imbalance. This approach will allow systems thinking, generate richer ideas about how to move forward, as well as improving the engagement and capability of all involved. The principles of Teaching Learning Circles will be applied to all projects in the community. For example, Rotary is going to assist the community to rebuild the church at the Old Mission site and pass on building and project management skills and knowledge to community members. What is different here, is that a 'formal' part of the project will be community members teaching the Rotarians about the traditional skills, culture and stories of the Traditional Owners. This will assist the development of a productive partnership, as opposed to a 'welfare handout' mentality. This is a new role and relationship for all parties, and will require development over time.

The Lockhart River community will lead and open each Teaching Learning Circle using the traditional language and ceremony of the clan group, at whose outstation the Teaching Learning Circle is being held. Having these circles on country recognises the importance of the people's land and sea country and creates a learning environment, which encourages creative new responses to old issues. 'Visitors' will improve their understanding of life and priorities for people in Lockhart River through this process. Both community and government leaders will spend time learning new things together, which may include partnership skills, perceptual positions for communicating and leadership skills.

### **2. Reducing red tape**

In recent years, both Australian and Queensland governments have aimed to improve the lives of people in Indigenous communities through establishing policy and operational frameworks where partnerships with community are valued and all partners share responsibility for outcomes. This deliberate shift of focus

means both partners have management and leadership responsibilities, as opposed to the somewhat paternalistic approaches of the past.

However, there are significant blockages to these policies being able to deliver better outcomes for Indigenous communities. There is significant red tape, too much emphasis on monitoring and not enough on mentoring and building capability. For example, in Lockhart River the community is funded by 21 different Australian and state government departments, and then has to administer a minimum of 58 separate grants. The total amount of grants administered by the council during 2003–04 was more than AUD\$4.5 million. This means at least 58 applications based on 58 sets of guidelines (which often duplicate or contradict each other), 58 agreements and 58 acquittals, with quarterly financial and activity reporting. The council could possibly apply for hundreds more government grants each year. The council manages the traditional local government functions of roads, rates and rubbish, as well as having responsibility for the management of most social and economic issues for the community. It manages far in excess of the number of functional areas managed by other local authorities, with far less resources and staff. All this in a community where literacy levels are low, there is very limited capability to understand and influence a culturally different bureaucracy, and the work ethic has been eroded by years of passive welfare and paternalistic approaches. Unfortunately, there is often little real understanding by visiting government workers as to the reality of this situation.

Thankfully both the Australian and state governments have heard the community and are working together to address this issue, with one possible outcome being streamlined budget arrangements. Both the council and government agree that strong accountability and performance arrangements will need to be in place, but that there must be more flexible ways of meeting both community and government priorities, and ways which give really give the council 'responsibility', with mutual obligation.

"If we had a single line budget where we had an amount of money, which Lockhart River used and was totally flexible, we could go out now and buy a tip truck, a backhoe and a water truck we could get income from Main Roads. Secondly we could go out and do the roads to the Outstations, which would have far better health outcomes for what they get out of the health money. Because we would get people back to country and they would be away from the Canteen, they would be away from the food at the shop so they would actually be eating healthier. They would not be drinking, they would be fishing, they would be doing all those things. But because the money is actually tied to grants we can't use it and it is the same with the barge. If we had a barge that got people to the Outstations, because that is where all the Outstations are on the sea, well 90% of them, so as Johnson said the sea is the highway." (Lockhart River Aboriginal Shire Council Leader)

### **3. Real jobs with real learning**

There are few full time employment opportunities available in Lockhart River outside of the Lockhart River Aboriginal Shire Council workforce — there are only 15 full-time positions with other agencies that community members could currently aspire to. So if a community resident is not in one of these full-time positions or a council full-time position, then they are on CDEP (Community Development Employment

Program, with a fortnightly gross wage of AUD\$445.76. As CEO, Peter Buckland, points out in the community plan:

“One of our aims is to increase the number of local people with real responsibility and jobs...This requires learning on the job with relevant mentors and development opportunities. Brief visits from outsiders and traditional structured training and employment processes developed outside the community have had few sustainable results to date in Lockhart River.”

The aim is to create real jobs and enhanced work ethic, through building self-esteem. As Councillor Gregory Pascoe says “Our puuya is slack — we want it to be strong”. The community leaders know that this is the foundation for their wellbeing, self-esteem and work ethic. Having a real job enables community members to participate in the real economy. If more people were working in real jobs, they would be able to pay for their lawn to be mowed or their house to be cleaned for example, which creates more self employment opportunities. One priority of the Lockhart River Aboriginal Shire Council is to have the houses built by locals, being mentored by visiting tradesmen. In the past, outside contractors came in and built the houses, leaving no increased skill capacity in the community. Profits also left the community, whereas that money could be recycled into more real jobs in the community. There are currently 33 families on the waiting list for houses, with 14 people in one three-bedroom house and six people in a one-bedroom unit, with an average of nine persons per dwelling (Lockhart River Housing Strategy 2005). So it would enable people to work on a real priority for them, and build pride in their community and their ability to address the day-to-day issues caused by overcrowding in houses.

Training, mentoring and work shadowing, in real time, on real jobs with real responsibility will develop local capability in a more productive way. Much of the training delivered to date has had little sustainable impact, as it hasn't: (a) been linked to real jobs; (b) taken account of literacy issues and cultural differences; and (c) used learning approaches designed to meet different learning needs.

#### **4. Research**

The community has endorsed the Puuya Strategy, to build the life-force and capability of community and government leaders, as a basis for achieving the outcomes stated in their community plan. Part of the Puuya Strategy involves the community itself being taught how to become action researchers — so that they can learn from what they are doing, as they are going along. They do not want ‘another outsider’ coming to study them — they have had enough of being observed and interpreted. One of the skills they need to strengthen is that of reflection — reflecting on actions and then adjusting their strategies and moving on. This will build their ownership of what is happening in the community, strengthen leadership ability, as well as build their ability to reflect, plan and act responsibly.

Community leaders have great ideas about how to move forward, and often they just need government to really listen, to understand their perspective and to really assist them implement their ideas instead of judging them harshly, or saying it doesn't meet the guidelines. Using this approach actually enables both community and government priorities to be met concurrently. The community is patiently waiting for some

funding assistance to make this research a reality — it seems to be another one of those areas that doesn't fit into any one agency's funding criteria and therefore progress appears to be stalled.

## **Conclusion**

The approach being used in Lockhart River has direct implications for other communities and, while it may not be directly replicable in other communities because the people and circumstances are unique to each place, the underlying paradigm and driving principles are very relevant to Australian and state government policy and other Indigenous communities.

The Building Productive Partnerships strategy is innovative because it focuses on a dramatic shift to government learning *from* and *with* the community rather than *telling* the community what to do. This new strategy results in community capacity building, increasing self-reliance and improved performance. It further builds on community renewal on the ground by increased resilience and provides practical steps for implementing community capacity building with economic, social, environmental and spiritual outcomes.

The major test is the ability of the community and government to grow and build on the progress to date, and for the community to increasingly take more responsibility. Sustainable outcomes will require the ongoing commitment of government to this partnership approach, and needs the involvement of staff who are willing to learn from the community and really work with them. This basic trust and commitment, together with the appropriate facilitative theories and processes as outlined in this paper, are the foundation for the ongoing learning that is required for Lockhart River to be a capable, enterprising community. There are no 'quick fixes' to issues that have developed over generations, and just throwing more money at the community isn't the answer. What is being suggested is transformational change for government, not the incremental approaches of the past — or the quality of life for our Indigenous Australians will not improve.

This strategy provides a framework for the vision and policies of the Lockhart River Aboriginal Shire Council as well as the Queensland and Australian governments to come alive with full life-force — puuya. The last words belong to well known leadership author, Margaret Wheatley (2004):

“People only support what they create themselves  
And only act responsibly for things they care about....  
There is no greater power than a community discovering what it cares about.”

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## **Biography**

Denise Hagan is Executive Director, Community Development in the Queensland Government Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy. Over the past 20 years she has led the development of a large number of quality integrated people development strategies for organisations (up to 180,000 staff) and communities.

Her work has been published and recognised locally as well as internationally. Her recent achievements include: finalist, Telstra Business Women's Awards — Community and Government (Queensland 2004); international award for outstanding practice-based management consulting paper for the Academy of Management, with two colleagues (New Orleans 2004); and finalist in Queensland Premier's Awards for Leadership and Innovation (2000 and 2003).

In her current role in a remote Aboriginal community in Cape York, she is leading innovation in community development and whole-of-government and community collaboration. She played a key leadership role in the development of the first Shared Responsibility Agreement completed in Australia — an agreement between the Lockhart River Aboriginal Shire Council and the Australian and Queensland governments.

Denise's personal vision is to lead people to the beauty of their souls, the strength of their spirit and their courage to dream again.

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