Engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People

Presentation by

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I acknowledge the Jagara and Turrbal peoples of the greater Brisbane area. I additionally wish to acknowledge my colleague Mary Martin from the Queensland Aboriginal and Islander Health Council (QAIHC) and my colleagues Brian Oldenburg and Rebecca Watson from Monash University. Lastly, I offer acknowledgement to the Indigenous Studies Research Network, Queensland University of Technology for their support.

I do not wish to enter the dialogue today about whether we should be using the word citizen or consumer although at some point there needs to be broader discussion about the words and their various meanings as we cannot talk about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the word citizen without talking about what it implies or does not imply and without talking about Indigenous sovereignty and the issues that surround Indigenous sovereignty. Furthermore, we cannot talk about the word consumer without talking about choice and the issues surrounding limited or having no choice. For example being forced to accept certain government programs and interventions is about not having a choice.

What I do offer today within the short time so some key points around the issue of engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

1. People regardless of whether consumers or citizens need background information to inform their engagement and to make it meaningful. Further to this, background information may be needed to discuss the topic with other relevant people before the point of engagement.

   If an organisation is wishing to engage with key individuals or community organisations or groups information may need to be provided and time given to

ensure that other people are involved in the process, for example, service organisations, consumers, Elders, people with whom have knowledge and skills, opinions etc. These may then be included back as a group response within the engagement process.

2. Engagement should not just be with individuals or groups who are perceived as 'the leader' or 'the leaders'. There are examples of where this happens in a range of environments.

    At the present time there are individuals in Queensland and Australia with whom the government and departments are talking with and engaging with whom do not necessarily have representational capacity or an evidence base. In some cases it is inappropriate for government decisions to be based on these opinions.

3.   Be openly transparent about the engagement process and exactly what, where, when and why the engagement is happening.

    The organisation needs to state if it is unclear about what it wants if it is unclear. That is ok to do and preferable than trying to give the impression of knowing what you are doing, where you want to be, what something would look like.

4. An organisation and its staff might need to look at how they filter their interpretations of the processes connected with engagement and the information gained through engagement. Moreover this needs to happen in order to not only hear the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, but engage with their voices. Questions that might need to be asked could include, 'Is our process and / or interpretation based on urban understandings? Or rural or remote understandings? Is it culturally biased in favour of the dominant culture? Does it favour one gender over another? How do we incorporate people from multiple social positionings?

    If this is not done what results is a distorted and privileged positioning of people from the dominant culture and their views and ways of doing business. It must be recognised within the engagement process that members of the dominant culture generally control the structures, content, processes and staff within the organisations and they can consciously or unconsciously reinforce the ways in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are marginalised. In this, the views, thoughts and ideas of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples get minimised, dismissed and devalued and racism and colonisation can be perpetuated, validated and endorsed. Within the present political climate it may also support and validate neo-liberalism.

    I share with you that in the preliminary findings of a recent Australian quantitative study of 2781 people undertaken by Maggie Brady (2008), 22.8% of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that Aboriginal people who no longer followed a traditional lifestyle were not really Aboriginal (Walter, 2008:2). This is surprising considering that only 9.2% of the respondents indicated that they mixed regularly with Aboriginal people on a day to day basis (Walter, 2008:2). The remaining 90.8% either did not regularly mix with Aboriginal people or did not know any Aboriginal people personally (Walter, 2008:2). Therefore it can be concluded that it is not experience which informs opinions and perceptions of Aboriginal peoples.

I ask you,

How do you 'know what you know' about Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples?

How do you 'do what you do' with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples?

How do you 'be' with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples?

Is your way of knowing, doing and being with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples based on experience, learnt from a book or university studies or other people or from perceptions and opinions sourced in newspapers? How do you work towards successful and meaningful engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples if this is the case?

5. Resources may need to be made available to enhance the level of engagement particularly if a lack of resources means minimal participation in engagement. Numerous examples come to my mind where as a result of inadequate resources Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people have been unable to participate in engagement or consultation around an issue, policy or new project. Furthermore, in some instances the time frames have not allowed for discussion amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples leading up to the meetings/ or points of engagement and hence I have seen people not participate rather than participate in a way which was token or not allow for a meaningful process. Rather than see this for what it was at the time, I have heard organisations state at a later date that they asked Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people but they didn't participate or no one turned up. This is wrong, and it is about blame shifting onto Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples rather than the organisation/s taking responsibility for ensuring that there were adequate timelines or resources to enable engagement or participation in a process of engagement. This has happened by a range of organisations, including government departments, university programs, research projects, non-for-profit organisations and more. It says more about the organisation doing the asking than Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and may depending on the circumstances even additionally re-enforce the assumed positions of power that enable members of the dominant culture to reproduce the coloniser/ colonised paradigm in a different contexts.

6. Recognise that positive forms of engagement can result in longer term relationships that work towards continuous improvements. It takes considered effort, resources and genuine commitment.

Reference
Walter, M. (2008). *nayri kah: Accessing the Power of Data*. Indigenous Methodologies Masterclass, Indigenous Studies Research Network, Queensland University of Technology. 3-5th September 2008 (Unpublished paper).