

Case Study

DWF: A leadership program that transforms Indigenous-led enterprise



Background

The David Williams Fellowship (DWF) is a 12-month leadership program for high-potential talent within the BT Financial Group (BTFG), a division of Westpac. The program fosters new knowledge, skills and leadership experience through a series of high-intensity initiatives that expand Fellows' understanding of the broader environment they work and live in. At the end of the year's program, Fellows present a significant business project to the CEO and Senior Management Team.

Since 2004 Jawun has been the community component of DWF, with a group of Fellows working on a project related to Indigenous-led development and capacity building. Jawun is considered a critical element of DWF because it helps Fellows learn more about Australia's sociopolitical context, and gives them experience in collaboration and consultation to deliver a tangible solution for a real issue.

Business Manager of Human Resources at BTFG, Aviva Leitch, says of the program, "*Jawun is seen as a critical and valuable part of the DWF program. We always get amazing feedback from the Fellows following their participation in the program.*" And as one ex-Fellow commented, the secondment offers "*a different lens to problem solving, one involving a real-life community issue*".

Approach

In the 13 years since the program's partnership with Jawun, 44 DWF participants have been seconded across Cape York, to five key Indigenous organisations spanning the communities of Wujal Wujal, Coen, Aurukun, Mossman, Hope Vale, Yarrabah and Cairns.

DWF project briefs are distinct. They typically build on a sequence of prior secondments which have significantly advanced an initiative that responds to a regional and Indigenous-led development priority; and in the words of one manager, they "supercharge" it. Two good examples are education reform and conservation in Cape York.

Around ten years ago, Cape York Indigenous leaders knew they needed to find their own solution to chronic educational under-achievement. In 2009 Cape York Partnerships (CYP) published a position paper titled 'The Most Important Reform', outlining an agenda for a new model of providing early childhood and primary school education in the Cape York peninsula.

Jawun secondees worked individually to put in place the elements of a truly Indigenous-led reform agenda, and progress was made. The availability of DWF participants provided an opportunity to elevate this, and a brief was written for a cohort of them to capture best practices worldwide and then co-design, with Indigenous leaders and CYP, a regional education reform package. The most significant outcome was the creation of the Cape York Aboriginal Australian Academy (CYAAA), a not-for-profit organisation established to reform primary school education in Cape York schools through a combination of Direct Instruction (DI) teaching methods and practices to support a child's bi-cultural identity and ability to function in 'two worlds'. It was designed to improve the quality of formal education supply in Indigenous communities in a way that complemented responsibility-based reforms intended to change student and parent behaviours. It was directly founded on the support of secondees in general and DWF participants in particular. Today education reform in Cape York is having a positive impact within the region, and providing learning for other regions.

A second significant initiative propelled by DWF participants was Cape York Conservation. Finding Indigenous-led solutions to land management had been a long-running priority in Cape York when the Jawun partnership began, with conservation increasingly prominent in years since then. Regional leaders wanted solutions that supported employment, enterprise, and access to country. With this in mind, CYP devised a project brief for DWF participants to bring a viable commercial lens to the region's conservation agenda, one which was well-conceived but stalling in practice.

Feral pigs were top of the list of conservation issues for Traditional Owners (TOs), with over a million wreaking havoc on more than 1.4 million hectares of wetlands. Churning up the land and destroying native plant and animal species (they were estimated to have eaten 99% of turtle eggs) they had brought the wetlands to the brink of collapse. Of many solutions proposed, most were unviable due to lack of capacity (e.g. for meat and leather processing) but one was looking feasible. A Canberra scientist had devised a method for making fertiliser out of the liquefied carcasses of feral pigs, and by the time three DWF participants came to Cape York in 2015, it seemed the first project that might work.

The DWF participants advanced a business plan for 'Feraliser', while recognising that a matrix of products was needed to address feral pig abatement and that for each one investors would need complete confidence. They identified a weakness around due diligence, and implemented a very rigorous process to address that. They formulated an investor pitch which included calculations of the carbon value gained by removing pigs (who release stored oxygen and speed up methane-producing rot when they churn up wetlands, plus destroy plant and animal species that hold carbon). They conceived an idea for CSIRO to contract 50% of their science budget to TOs to facilitate mobile science research facilities (e.g. transport and accommodation), and to train rangers on data collection to prepare for future employment opportunities. In what Cape York Conservation's CEO Mike Winer began to call 'the war room', they unfurled a strategy for an exciting new business model for conservation, one that created opportunities out of complex challenges and could be taken seriously by investors.

Feraliser is now an up-and-running business, with funding and employees. CSIRO money has been secured for pig tracking, of which half will go to TOs. Considerable commercial interest has been generated among both private investors and government, lining up Cape York Conservation for a sustainable future built on sustainably managed environments.

Outcomes

Over 13 years, the impact of David Williams Fellows on organisations in Cape York has been enormous. Using the best of corporate skills and aptitude, regionally specific and Indigenous-led ideas have been elevated into viable initiatives with actual social or economic outcomes.

For Indigenous Organisations the impact is significant. Mike Winer said the opportunity to work with DWF participants was *"a remarkable and life changing experience for me. The project has taken an important complex opportunity from piles of research papers and plans to a practical well-structured enterprise that will raise millions of dollars and create hundreds of jobs. Prior to their work the project was jammed. It has been released and supercharged"*.

For the Fellows, the development gained through the program has helped progress their careers as well as provided a unique learning opportunity. 2015 Fellow Fabian Ross, says, *"It was one of the best experiences I have ever had, because it took you out of the norm. We needed to adapt to a change of environment and execute a strategy with cultural and political obstacles"*. And with many Fellows now in senior positions within the Westpac Group, Aviva Leitch considers the Jawun secondment *"an essential part of BT's talent management strategy for senior leadership"*.

Next Steps

After years of transformational support to Cape York, from 2017 the David Williams Fellows will support the Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (NPY) Lands, a region that has more recently partnered with Jawun. Like Cape York, NPY Lands are recognised for having strong ideas for Indigenous-led development, and there is vast scope for elevating this through the DWF program. The first Fellows are due to work at NPY Women's Council on establishing a viable social enterprise.