

Case Study

Supporting Yolngu managers to drive change for their communities



Background

The Gumatj Corporation (GC) represents the Gumatj peoples, one of the 13 Yolngu clans of North East Arnhem Land. The GC's key focus is 'to develop sustainable industry through harnessing natural resources in order to promote a healthy society, good education and the ability to gain and maintain real employment opportunities for Yolngu without government support'.

GC has several business enterprises geared towards realising this vision, including:

- an agriculture division which includes a cattle station, abattoir and retail butcher shop
- a timber mill which produces timber for furniture and truss packages for the surrounding communities
- a construction division which includes a concrete batch plant
- a mobile fabrication and repair team and a mechanical workshop
- a retail precinct which has a nursery, community shop and café
- a social benefit precinct which has a play group, community kitchen, laundry and transition school; and
- a commercial contracting division with contracts covering a grounds maintenance program, the local waste management site and a government-sponsored homeland management team.

All these initiatives provide real jobs for the Yolngu people of North East Arnhem Land. In providing these jobs, GC has to address a number of challenges and barriers to employment, including low levels of literacy and numeracy, and a number of generational social issues.

In 2013, GC engaged Jawun secondee Damien Messina from CBA to establish a Gopu community store in GC's retail precinct. Damien engaged his project management skills, and just 10 days after he departed Arnhem Land to return to his role at CBA the Gopu store was open for business.

Six months later, Damien decided to take a career break from CBA and return to Arnhem Land. CBA have a strong career and personal development culture and supported Damien's decision.

During Damien's second stint with GC, he tapped into the resources provided by Jawun in order to help build the capacity of the organisation in a number of ways. In February 2015, with the Gopu store in operation for over a year, Damien developed a secondment brief aimed at improving efficiencies at the store and increasing the capacity of the store's Yolngu staff. Chris Simpson, a KPMG consultant with a background in business performance services, was selected to undertake this project.

Approach

Working as GC's Operations Manager, Damien identified Dana Yunupingu an employee with the right potential to develop into management material, and in mid 2014 Dana became the Gopu store manager. Over time, Damien was able to build up Dana's confidence by demystifying the manager role and allowing her to learn from any mistakes in a supportive environment.

With Damien's time stretched between the Gopu store and other GC enterprises, Chris Simpson provided valuable support by working directly with Dana to incorporate the best retail practises into the store's management. Among other things, Chris showed Dana how to input prices into the store's system and also built her understanding of the underpinning concepts of profit margins and pricing strategies.

Dana is passionate about people making healthy choices when they shop. Together with Chris, she devised a pricing strategy to promote healthy choices, increasing the price margins on cigarettes and decreasing the prices of fruit and vegetables. At one point, a packet of cigarettes cost \$35 and apples were nearly free! They are both now more reasonable priced as Dana grapples with the balance of providing a service, being profitable and applying her healthy-living pricing strategy. According to Alicia Marika, a shop assistant working with Dana, some of the skills Chris taught them are significant for longer-term 'independence, pride and sustainability'.

Outcomes

The work of Damien over his secondment and career break combined with the skills provided by secondees like Chris is yielding results for GC on a number of levels, and has a flow-on effect for the community.

With Dana at the helm, supported by Damien, the GC board and CEO Klaus Helms, the number of engaged Yolngu staff at the retail precinct has increased, and the precinct is now a buzzing hub. One of these more recent employees is Zowie, a young mother of two. Due to her employment at the Gopu store, her five-year-old daughter, Katie, goes to Nhulunbuy Primary every day, along with Dana's daughter Vanessa. Both these girls have won attendance and achievement awards, and when asked what her favourite thing about school is, Katie exclaims, 'Learning!'.

Healthy shopping choices at the store have increased because Dana actively controls this through pricing, ordering and product placement.

GC now employs four Yolngu staff in management roles who are increasing in confidence daily. Dana co-presented at Chris Simpson's secondment debrief, as well as at the 2015 Jawun Executive Visit to North East Arnhem Land in front of 11 executives.

Through the development and engagement of these four managers, there is improved cohesion between CG management and teams. A recent consultation with CG staff revealed common themes around pride in wearing the GC uniform, and the feeling that it was genuinely a community- and family-run business and that everyone is truly part of something.

In mid 2015, Damien returned to his role with CBA. He and CBA management plan to conduct an assessment of the additional value he now adds to the business following his career break.

Klaus Helms, CEO of GC, explained the importance of Damien's work with the organisation: 'Having Damien arrive on our doorstep was like receiving a light in the dark night. He was inspirational and knowledgeable, yet still young and impressionable enough to be able to learn new tricks in a very short time. His corporate expertise helped shape, and will continue to help shape, the Gumatj Corporation. His dedication, energy and spirit were like a breath of fresh air for us. We now have to learn to live without him. But we understand why. The material he left us and the progress he made will continue to roll on.'

Next Steps

With Yolngu employees now engaged in middle and senior management roles at GC, the momentum is gathering pace for further Yolngu staff development and engagement.

Jawun secondee David Le, from CBA, recently worked with the GC board and senior management to develop a clear strategy for the organisation over the next 10 years. Key targets were identified, including 85% school attendance for children of staff, and a goal of 50% of middle management as Yolngu Co-Managers. Jawun will continue to support this vision with resources that assist in building the capacity of these managers and in achieving employment objectives.