

Case Study

Supporting Gumatj Corporation's prisoner rehabilitation & employment program



Background

A mix of complex social and cultural factors contribute to crime and also create barriers for offenders reintegrating back into society. Whilst many of these factors are also experienced by non-Indigenous ex-prisoners, their effect is often more pronounced for Indigenous offenders seeking to reintegrate into the community and achieve sustained employment.

These complex contributing factors reflect many of the challenges that Gungahara-based Gumatj Corporation, in North East Arnhem Land, seeks to address. These are issues such as:

- Poor physical and mental health
- Drug and alcohol use
- Financial strain
- Low literacy and numeracy levels
- Unstable, unsafe or crowded housing.

The Gumatj Corporation's vision is economic independence for Yolngu people achieved through employment and business enterprise development.

The common focus on addressing the factors that lead to criminal behavior resulted in the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between Gumatj Corporation and the Department of Correctional Services (DoCS). This agreement involved working with low-risk 'class four' prisoners, of predominantly Yolngu heritage, employed on Gumatj Corporation sites across the region, including the Gulkula Garma site, Gumatj Waste and Garrithiya Cattle Station.

Participants, under the full control of DoCS, are paid an income into a trust fund, minus board and lodging costs. Following release, there is the potential for participants to be employed on a related Gumatj worksite. The program enables an effective transition from prison life back into the community.

According to elder Dhanggal Gurruwiwi, the connection back to community and land is one of the most important elements of the program. Dhanggal and Djapirri Mununggirritj are two Yolngu elders who have been instrumental in bringing the program to North East Arnhem Land, following several visits to Berrimah Prison in Darwin where they met with prisoners to understand the key issues. Hearing of a camp in the Tanami Desert, NT where low-risk prisoners worked in the community, Dhanggal and Djapirri Mununggirritj took the initiative to bring a similar program to their own region. Dhanggal talks of the connection to land as an important element in the healing process for both the men and the families affected by their crimes, a process she has seen succeed a number of times. "The mediator is the land" she explains.

This combined spiritual and practical approach for the rehabilitation of prisoners was completely new. With limited resources, Gumatj Corporation were concerned they would not be able to ensure its success and its integration into their operations.

There were a number of potential challenges with the implementation of such a program. Issues of note include:

- The employment of prisoners must supplement and not replace the Yolngu employed at the Gumatj Corporation work sites
- Gumatj Corporation and employees must not be inadvertently exposed to legal implications.

Jawun facilitated two secondees to work with Gumatj Corporation on this program. Dale Wegener, a Program Manager in Infrastructure and Project Delivery from CBA, had the right skills to conduct stakeholder engagement, negotiation and the design and establishment of systems to ensure successful operation of the project.

A second secondee from Qantas, Paul Ishak, with an operational management and supervisory background, worked with DoCS and prisoners to integrate the program with current Gumatj Corporation operations on a number of projects.

Approach

CEO of Gumatj Corporation, Klaus Helms explains: *“This was the first ever project that was delicately balanced between the NT government, Gumatj Corporation and the people of North East Arnhem Land. Careful consideration of the inhabitants of North East Arnhem Land had to be negotiated so that all parties could see a win-win in this project. Dale was successful in doing so.”*

Dale was in constant communication with DoCS during the design and implementation process to ensure compliance and to mitigate legal risks to Gumatj Corporation. His diligence resulted in the identification of a number of issues with the department’s requirements that would negatively impact any organisation employing prisoners. Subsequently several senior staff from Berrimah Prison flew to Nhulunbuy to understand the issues and effect the required changes.

To understand the practices and develop position descriptions for the roles on these sites, Dale also spent time at each potential Gumatj Corporation site where prisoners would be hosted. This activity enabled him to identify tasks the prisoners could be employed to do without replacing or threatening Yolngu jobs.

Dale also met with the community and local township businesses to identify opportunities for full-time employment of prisoners concluding their sentences. A component of this included workshopping the procedures he had developed for the program to assist employers in managing the transition and employment process successfully.

The critical engagement, negotiation and design work undertaken by Dale resulted in the establishment of reporting and employment processes for the program. This included the creation of position descriptions, reporting templates and process diagrams, and the communication of the above to all parties in a briefing pack.

Qantas secondee, Paul Ishak, continued the work Dale started at an operational level, managing work crews of prisoners at Gumatj Corporation sites previously identified by Dale. An example of this included a project at the waste management facility. Paul initially identified the solution for an issue at the site and worked to resolve the problem, supervising a crew of prisoners to build recycling bays using old tyres.

His hands-on and inclusive approach meant Paul was able to successfully integrate the prisoners with current worksite practices and the existing workforce to deliver on critical areas of work where there was a shortfall in existing Gumatj Corporation operations.

CEO Klaus Helms explained: “Paul worked in close contact with senior management and directly engaged with the Yolngu people of the area without inflicting any misinterpretation between our two cultures.”

Outcomes

Dale’s work resulted in seven of the former prisoners entering full-time employment during his secondment. This has since more than doubled to 16, an outcome that will contribute to

minimising the likelihood of re-offending and assist a number of the men to renew their community ties, a key objective of the program.

Aside from the specific project deliverables Paul undertook whilst managing the prisoner workforce, his contribution created a structured pathway of working with the prisoner employment program for Gumatj Corporation's supervisors and management going forward.

The Rio Tinto alumina refinery is a major employer in Nhulunbuy, and is due to close later in 2014. Another positive outcome of Gumatj's program is that it will provide alternative employment options for the Nhulunbuy population during this challenging time.

Next steps

Additional funding has been committed to the program operational costs in the 2014/15 state budget that will facilitate an increase in the number of low-risk prisoners participating in the program, an increase from 30 to 50 prisoners in Nhulunbuy.

Gumatj Corporation will continue to employ prisoners from the program to assist them in sustaining their business operations and to build life skills that prevent reoffending