

Case Study

Dhimurru Rangers lead the field, putting 'Two Way' management into practice



Background

Dhimurru Aboriginal Corporation (Dhimurru) is an incorporated land management organisation that integrates Yolngu and Ngapaki (non-Yolngu) cultures through 'Two Way' management, defined as “using both Ngapaki and Yolngu values to do our work”. This means all Dhimurru decisions, policies and systems integrate elements of both cultures to achieve the best possible outcomes – complying with mainstream governance laws, without detriment to Indigenous culture, people, law, knowledge systems, language and country.

In 2002, Traditional Owners volunteered approximately 92,000 hectares of land and 9,000 hectares of sea country as Indigenous Protected Area (IPA) for Dhimurru to manage. In 2013, they dedicated additional areas of their land and sea country to IPA, increasing Dhimurru's management to 550,000 hectares of land area and extending the sea country boundary out to 40km from the coastline. With this dramatic increase and with 21 mostly Yolngu employees, Dhimurru outgrew many of its systems including its Workplace Health and Safety (WHS) procedures. A comprehensive WHS system was much needed: rangers work with pesticides, winches and chainsaws, and encounter dangerous animals such as *baru* (crocodile), *bapi* (snake) and *gatabanga* (buffalo) when in the field.

In February 2016 Peta Miller, Director Special Advisor with Safe Work Australia was seconded to Dhimurru. Peta had over 35 years' experience in both public and private sectors of WHS and workers' compensation, and was a senior manager of policy and research teams developing major national initiatives. With this expertise and skill set, she was the ideal match to support Dhimurru in updating their WHS, and also creating a safety culture. It was clear from her initial interview that Peta also had an aptitude for cultural learning and Two Way thinking: she spoke of wanting to see for herself “the importance of connection to culture”, and of seeking to not only learn this but also “transfer understanding of this both to my organisation and beyond, to the WHS professional community”.

Approach

Peta spent the initial weeks taking time to understand how Dhimurru worked, its culture and its priorities, by immersing herself in the flow of Dhimurru's day to day work life. This included attending morning team meetings, heading out with rangers to the field, and understanding what Dhimurru meant by Two Way communication including important Yolngu cultural *rom* (rules) that impact who can and can't work together. Peta, listened, watched and asked questions to understand and respect cultural protocols, and built a rapport with all of Dhimurru employees. This resulted in strong connections with the rangers, especially the *miyalk* (women) rangers.

During her secondment, Peta analysed Dhimurru's existing WHS and ran a safety audit of the organisation. She highlighted areas where Dhimurru already met standards, such as its appointment of a WHS representative. Where there were areas to strengthen, she knew it was important to engage not only senior management but also all employees, to ensure ownership of personal and

organisational safety messages. Reflecting on this Chairperson Rarrtjiwuy Herdman said: “*We now know having our workers decide what the big safety risks are and then making their own safety instructionsis not only a good idea, but is also culturally appropriate.*”

Peta’s professional approach of ‘consultation, collaboration & cooperation’ married well with Dhimurru’s Two Way communication model. Based on this and the relationships she had with Dhimurru staff, Peta led team discussions to identify WHS risks and opportunities. Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) solutions were agreed that matched national WHS standards and were also in keeping with Yolngu culture. One example was the Globally Harmonised System (GHS) of Classification and Labelling of Chemicals in the Dhimurru Chemical Work Shed. As Yolngu employees explained to her, “*English is our second language, or even third language, so at Dhimurru we need to do our training differently*”. Implementing the GHS with team-agreed, locally relevant symbols meant all employees could easily read and identify all chemicals quickly – and felt ownership of a system they had helped design and brought local meaning into.

During her secondment, Peta also supported Dhimurru’s Yolngu Executive Support Officer Thomas Amagula on his own professional journey as he developed his understanding of the Ngapaki WHS system and integrated it with Yolngu values. With the help of Senior Cultural Advisor Djalinda Yunupingu they identified three critical Yolngu concepts for this – *raypirri* (disciplined), *djaka* (careful) and *ralpa* (committed/enthusiastic) – and used these to structure Dhimurru’s new WHS approach.

Outcomes

Peta and Dhimurru maintained contact after the secondment, while Peta worked to put into practice her idea of sharing what she’d learnt about Dhimurru’s Two Way approach in the context of WHS. She arranged for Paul Augustin, Dhimurru Facilitator, and Thomas Amagula, to speak about their work at the prestigious annual National Safety Convention organised by the Safety Institute of Australia (SIA) and held at the Olympic showground in Sydney in September 2016.

Peta, Paul and Thomas had the idea to use film to showcase Dhimurru’s approach. Many in the community were engaged and true collaboration shown through support of Nhulunbuy organisations and businesses. With the Australian Government actively promoting Indigenous businesses, Peta was able to get Safe Work Australia to contract Indigenous-owned technology firm Nallawilli to bring the film together, and SBS to provide Yolngu Matha captioning. The end result was an impressive 16 minute film, ‘*Yolngu and Ngapaki: Getting the WHS balance right*’.

Following the film’s presentation, a large audience of WHS experts from across the country spoke of being extremely impressed at such a visually compelling embodiment of Dhimurru’s ‘Two Way’ value system. Peta, Thomas and Paul answered questions about how they had put into practice Dhimurru’s core value around integrating Yolngu and Ngapaki knowledge, communication and management.

The impact of the secondment continues. Dhimurru management has improved overall WHS systems, which staff are using and taking ownership of. There is organisational pride in having taken Two Way from an idea to a set of actions that hold Dhimurru together, protect the natural environment and people’s relationship with it, and offer learning to others within and beyond the region.

Next Steps

Dhimurru will share its WHS approach with other organisations, through the film and in other ways, and continue the discussions it has generated within the WHS professional community. The film will become part of Dhimurru’s induction program and further WHS investments are planned, including new risk management software learnt about through the SIA convention. There are plans to re-record ‘*Getting the WHS Balance Right*’ in Yolngu Matha language, and release this at NAIDOC week 2017.

Beyond WHS, this progressive Indigenous-led organisation continues to protect and maintain land and sea country by finding practical ways to integrate up-to-date Ngapaki practices with Yolngu values of *raypirri*, *djaka* and *ralpa* in all aspects of its work; putting Two Way values into practice.