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Maggie Kavanagh

THE BALGO COMMUNITY CAPACITY BUILDING MODEL

ABSTRACT – The Balgo Community Capacity Building approach to building and sustaining a local governance structure

The future of remote Aboriginal community governance was recently described as a “future fire storm”. In Balgo this year a unique community capacity building approach has been slowly developing an appropriate community governance structure from the ground up. The model balances the requirements of the mainstream corporate system of ORIC and an Aboriginal perspective to governance. We will detail the steps undertaken and discuss what has worked and why. Our model illustrates how intensive support based in a community can greatly enhance Aboriginal peoples’ ability to engage in setting up and sustaining a meaningful and solid local governance structure.

INTRODUCTION

This year I have been living in Balgo community and working as the community capacity builder. Balgo is located 850km north of Alice off the Tanami Highway, approx. half way between Alice and Broome – so quite remote probably very very remote I would say....

Balgo has a population of about 400 – 450 people was founded as a Catholic mission and is home to Kukatja, Jaru, Nardi, Walmajarri and Walrpiri people. English is not their first language.

For the past 5 years Balgo has been under Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations (ORIC) appointed administration which means it has had no community council, no chairperson, no control over community resources and has basically been run by an accounting firm in Perth.
People use the analogy that Balgo has been like an old broken down motor car abandoned and forgotten in the bush. This experience has shattered people’s confidence in themselves and as they say has made their spirits feel very low.

Little new resources have come into the community in this period. No one went batting for Balgo, it has been in a holding pattern. So Balgo is a community with very few Aboriginal people employed in real jobs, without a community hall, no aged care or disability program, no programs for young children or mothers, no childcare or preschool programs, no after school or holiday programs for kids, a poorly funded school with only 1 secondary teacher, 2 police to cover 3 communities with a population of 850 people, no drug and alcohol services and the limited youth service is mainly funded by Catholic organisations. It also has some of the worst and most inadequate housing of any community I have been to in 25 years.

This year the WA Department of Indigenous Affairs funded my CCB position as a pilot program. It is the only one of its kind funded in WA. Basically my role has been to support the community to move out of administration, to establish a governance structure and to assist people sustain this process.

My interest in attending this symposium is to share with you the story of how our community capacity building approach has worked in Balgo and why we think it is a good model. Hopefully you will think there are useful lessons to be learnt from our approach.

**THE MODEL**

Wirrimanu Aboriginal Corporation - WAC who I work for is incorporated under the Corporations (Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander) Act 2006.
With the recent changes to the CATSI Act, there is more scope than the previous Act to include Aboriginal perspectives of governance within their constitutions – now referred to as “rule books”.

Last year as result of a series of ORIC funded workshops, the community decided to have 14 directors to represent the 14 major family groupings in the community. People decided themselves that this was how they wanted their corporation to be structured.

I think for remote communities this representative model is far more meaningful than electing a first past the post system or having a council made up of people who are the best talkers. It is inclusive and ensures that all the families have a seat at the table.

But at the start of the year when I commenced work at Balgo, the community had not yet committed to this new structure. There was still some reluctance and I think a lack of confidence about how to go about appointing the directors.

So I suggested that we just start having meetings anyway and that anyone who was interested could come along. There hadn’t been any representative community meetings for 5 years so people were clearly out of practice in how to conduct meetings.

So for 5 months until the directors were appointed we met every second Tuesday as people decided this was the best day to have the meetings. We called them the community advisory committee (CAC) meetings as we were still under administration. We had 20 -25 people attending and they lasted for an average of 2 ½ - 3 hours. People were interested, had got hooked in and kept coming back. This was really the start of the engagement.
These meetings then became the focus for the governance learning and training, for the rebuilding process.

My firm belief is that people gain confidence in these domains through practice, practice, practice. And this of course is an Aboriginal way of viewing the world – you learn by doing, over and over again.

The point of making these meetings the hub of the process was to cement learning about governance in real meeting settings. We applied the learning as we were going along to real issues in the community. People could see they were making proper decisions about their community and applying them. I remember one of their first actions was to ask a known drug dealer who had managed to avoid police detection to leave the community. He did and this gave people confidence that they had successfully dealt with a serious matter affecting their young people.

Another example has been the CAC dealing with requests for parolees to return to Balgo. Historically these requests were handled by the CEO and now people said they should make those decisions. But these are hard things for people to decide upon because you are talking about family and of course family comes first.

So in the meetings people negotiate rules for parolees coming back, tell them they must work if they want to come to Balgo, they consider the views of the victims and their families and they openly say we must make these decisions without fear or favour. This in fact has become a key phrase in our meetings because people get it. To peoples’ credit they have not accepted all parolee requests and they have become much tougher on enforcing their rules as the year has progressed.

The emphasis of the governance learning and training in these meetings has been to view good governance principles as tools to help you have good meetings and make good decisions. It also reinforces that people
have to get along around the table. And of course many actions come out of these meetings thus further raising the level of engagement.

I will now outline some of the other steps we have taken in building up good governance practices and talk about what I think has been working well.

Some of these things might sound really obvious to you but sometimes I think it is too easy for whitefellas in particular to overlook key things that do make a difference in conducting business in an Aboriginal community.

1. Firstly we have enshrined some significant concepts and practices into the rule book and meetings. They have included:

i. Developing their own guiding principles. By identifying your core values you have to think about what is important to you. Balgo’s first key first principle is respect – kinti kinti for each other.

ii. Establishing a permanent circle of elders – 4 senior men and 4 senior women to sit alongside the directors and give advice on land, law and cultural matters. This is written into the rule book. They attend the meetings and their central role is always acknowledged by the directors.

iii. Establishing their own code of conduct for the meetings and called it their “working well together agreement”. People actively use this in meetings to reinforce good behaviour – a practice I think is exemplary.

iv. Balgo now has a guide for visitors to meetings. This in particular has been an empowering tool for the community. It turns around the “good governance” debate and says to bureaucrats and other visitors if you are going to come into our meetings this is the way we want you to conduct yourself. So the guide says – speak in clear English people can understand, don’t use jargon or acronyms, be concise, know what you’re going to say
and stick to it and when you are finished and got what you came for – leave and don’t hang around for business that is not yours! Give us our space.

2. Secondly we have made the meetings important. They have been given a real status in the community and are widely respected. The meetings are the focus for building up the understanding of governance issues.

3. Thirdly the style of meetings are important too. Ours are welcoming environments with a cup of tea and lunch always provided. This not only helps people to feel relaxed and comfortable, it is showing an understanding of reciprocity. This is an absolute fundamental concept of relationships in Aboriginal culture. People see me doing something for them, that I am respecting their work and commitment by ensuring there is a comfortable and friendly atmosphere. This supportive environment also extends to an office that people have basically been locked out of for five years.

4. Fourthly meeting business is not rushed. People take their time, grab a cup of tea and go through the minutes and ease their way into a meeting. This of course contrasts with the way whitefellas’ often –no-nonsense – straight –into- it- approach to meetings. Our minutes by the way are written in large font and for the benefit of older people they are always read out aloud. We also have dictionaries in the meetings and we constantly stop the meetings to look up the meanings of words. It’s good to de mystify language and people love learning these new words.

5. Fifthly we make sure people start and finish the meetings well. People say they know to leave their differences outside the room so that when they are inside we must get on and work well together. This doesn’t mean people don’t deal with conflict, they do but it means they try to resolve it so that people can leave the meetings without feeling that there is unresolved business. We also make sure there is reflection time in the
meetings to talk about people’s roles and responsibilities, their feelings and how they think things are going – so it’s not all just about meeting business. People are also learning the art of how to balance outside business with community business and how to develop and set an agenda.

6. Number six – we accommodate peoples’ mobility by replacing individual directors who can’t attend meetings with other family members. This approach has the benefit of ensuring that all family groups are represented in all meetings plus the knowledge base of more individuals is built up.

7. Lastly People have developed their team ‘slogan’ if you like in the Kukatja language - Kutju warala marrka nyinaku wanpa – together we will be strong. This is powerful to people knowing they have many differences in the community and so it keeps reminding them of their bigger goal.

It’s very pleasing to see people getting the learning about key governance concepts and more importantly understanding their rationale. So for example people in Balgo – know what quorum means – they know it as the right number for a meeting. They know their number is 8, they know why you need to have a quorum. They tell each other not to leave the room in a meeting because they don’t want the numbers to fall. They give each other a hard time if there’s too much going in and out of meetings.

CONCLUSION

So now I wanted to conclude by summarising what I see as the key elements of success to our Balgo model.

1. Having a dedicated position based in the community working alongside people to develop their governance model and practices is a key factor. Applying a community development approach to this process is I believe best practice.
There really is a sense that we are in this together. You focus on building up relationships, mutual respect is the basis of your work. You’re part of the community so you get to appreciate the ebb and flow and realities of community life – including things like sorry business, the hot hot winds, the electricity blackouts, the terrible roads, the 4 flat tyres on the Tanami, the $6.60 for 2 litres of milk, limited contact with the outside world. Flying in and out to do this work is not the same.

2. There is community acceptance of a model that people have developed themselves. So for instance the 14 directors reflecting the community profile, the circle of elders, the working well together agreement for meetings, the guide for visitors, the respectful and thoughtful meetings – all of this is owned by people.

3. The governance learning and training is applied in real settings and is therefore more meaningful.

4. That with the right support and resources a governance model can be a conduit for positive change.

5. Lastly – having belief in people. This process has been about empowerment. Not enough people have faith in Aboriginal people’s capabilities and talents. You cannot underestimate the importance of a bolstering, encouraging support to people who are trying to turn their community around.

RECOMMENDATIONS

I would like to make some recommendations – I don’t know if they’ll be taken up but there’s just 3 I’d like to make for your consideration.
1. No community should be kept in administration for 5 years. Government should not allow this to happen and I think it is an indication of the powerlessness of remote communities that this situation was allowed to linger on in Balgo.

2. The government should fund community capacity builder positions that focus on governance in probably all large remote communities.

3. I think more people with experience and passion should consider working in remote communities for a year or more. There needs to be a greater sharing of the talent around the country and a willingness to go outside your comfort zone and practically assist communities deal with enormously complex issues and problems.

POST SCRIPT

I’d like to end my presentation by telling you that Balgo has now been out of administration for just over 2 months. We have 14 very keen and dedicated directors. The chairperson for the first time has an office in the administration building and the fortnightly meetings continue. They still go for up to 3 hours and we always get a quorum.

Improving school attendance has been their first main focus with great results to date. Their first decision was to delay the opening of the community store each morning until there is a reasonable number of children at school. Almost immediately the school attendance has increased from about 30 % to 70 – 75%. They had aimed for 50%. The directors also present weekly prizes to the best attenders as a further incentive.

Balgo still has a lot of catching up to do and better resourcing for a wide range of community services, programs and infrastructure is paramount.
The directors know they have a big job ahead of them but they are feeling a lot more confident about facing their challenges. Last week a group of the directors travelled to Pitjantjatjara and Ngaanyatjarra communities in central Australia on a study tour and have returned feeling buoyed by what other Aboriginal people are doing in their communities. They have come back saying we know now what is possible.

This is what people now say about their governance in Balgo.

_The broken down motor car is back on the road, out of the bush. This year it’s been getting a service, tuning, making sure that everything works. It’s been repaired, it’s got new tyres, it’s got a driver (that’s the directors) and passengers (that’s the community) and it’s been fuelled up. We’ve turned the key and it’s just started moving again, slowly, and now it’s ready to start going places._

Maggie Kavanagh  
Community Capacity Builder  
Balgo Community, WA  
ccb@wirrimanu.org.au

Ph: 08 91688900  
0438 524050