

IMPROVING INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIAN GOVERNANCE: THE HOW AND WHAT OF CAPACITY STRENGTHENING

Authors: Roxanne Bainbridge, Janya McCalman and Komla Tsey

Introduction

In this paper, capacity strengthening will be pragmatically explored in response to two key questions: what enabling approaches are accessible for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australian (hereafter Indigenous) organisations to effectively make governance decisions; and what approaches can facilitate partnership processes between communities and governments for improving Indigenous Australian organisational governance. In particular, it will consider 1) the need to strengthen both hard capacities such as resources, technical skills, functions, structures, equipment and so forth; and soft capacities such as values, morale, engagement, motivation, incentives and staff wellbeing; and 2) one strategy that has successfully been used to facilitate partnership between Indigenous organisations and governments - reflective participatory approaches. It will draw from reflective short case study examples in which the authors have participated to demonstrate how, where and when capacity strengthening principles have been adopted. Given the paucity of well-designed evaluations, key principles and practices that appear to work to strengthen capacity will be discussed. Key amongst these are community ownership of governance improvement, collaborative development approaches that are context-dependent and long-term partnerships between government agencies and Indigenous communities built on trust and respect. Capacity-strengthening must have a clear notion of what type of capacity is being strengthened, for whom, and how the effectiveness will be measured.

Background

A literature review conducted by Tsey, McCalman, Bainbridge & Brown (2012) found that of the 127 references focussed on Indigenous Australian governance, only 12 (9%) provided accounts of programs designed to improve governance through strengthening organisational capacity. Of these, three focussed on strengthening the capacity of leaders, three involved informal governance through groups, four accounted for Indigenous organisations and two related to national Council of Australian Governments (COAG) initiatives. Accounts however, were predominantly descriptive, with some process evaluations. Having so few accounts of capacity strengthening processes and rigorous evaluations means that we have a relatively poor evidence-base from which to understand what works in strengthening capacity for effective governance, or how to implement successful strategies. We are very good at describing the extent of problems, and what needs to happen, but there are very few evaluations of what actually works. This deficiency is demonstrated more broadly in Indigenous literature across a range of different areas. For example, Sanson-Fisher's (2006) review of the Indigenous health literature from Canada, the United States, New Zealand and Australia revealed a strong focus on descriptive research, (92%), with very little measurement and intervention research. Paul et al.'s (2010) review of the "sorry state of the evidence base" for improving the health of Indigenous populations from the same countries found only 19 out of 665 intervention studies that met rigorous quality criteria. They concluded that there were insufficient numbers to confidently establish the effectiveness of strategies for improving health outcomes.

Paul et al.'s sentiment and findings also cut across our own rapid systematic review results. For instance, reviews in Indigenous mentoring (Bainbridge, Tsey & McCalman, 2013), cultural competence (McCalman, Bainbridge, Clifford & Tsey, 2013), program transfer and implementation (McCalman, Tsey, Clifford, Earles, Shakeshaft & Bainbridge, 2012), sexual assault (McCalman, Bridge, Whiteside,

Bainbridge, Tsey, & Jongen, 2013), suicide (Clifford, Doran & Tsey, 2013), and child and maternal health (Jongen, McCalman, Bainbridge, & Tsey, 2013), all show a consistent lack of evaluation research, including any assessment of cost-effectiveness. Because well-designed evaluations for assessing the effectiveness of capacity-enhancing projects was also absent in the review of Indigenous governance, the approach to its development was to draw out some of the principles that 'appear' to work. So despite the fact Indigenous people have been researched to death (Smith, 2005), there is very little corresponding evidence to understand what works best, or how to implement such strategies. The lacking evidence also manifests itself in the poor health and socio-economic status reported for Indigenous Australians. There are three clear requirements here for Indigenous organisations, governments, researchers and funding bodies: 1) a balance of descriptive research, measurement research (are things getting better), and intervention research (evaluation); 2) rigorous evaluations in conducting business; and 3) in the meantime, systematic literature reviews as one cost-efficient way of ascertaining key principles and practices that appear to work.

Strengthening Capacity for Improving Indigenous Governance

In the 1970s, Australian policies encouraged Indigenous efforts towards autonomy through the empowerment of community-level organisations. Indigenous communities played leading roles in building community-controlled local government, health, housing, alcohol rehabilitation and welfare services, emphasising the development of Indigenous technical and managerial skills. In the 1990s, the term 'community capacity building' emerged, but there was little evidence of whether it actually worked. It entered the Australian policy arena in 1996, within the context of concern for reducing welfare-dependency, fostering local participation and decision-making, and trialing new approaches to partnerships and coordination across government. As such, capacity strengthening became an intercultural phenomenon, whereby organisational capacity strengthening for Indigenous community governance needed to involve intercultural engagement between Indigenous people, their organisations and governments. Getting the balance right here has been incredibly difficult – particularly between operational autonomy, political support, performance and accountability.

Capacity strengthening two-ways through partnerships

Hunt et al. (2008) describes Indigenous community governance: "the evolving processes, relationships, institutions and structures by which a group of people, community or society organize themselves collectively to achieve the things that matter to them". For Indigenous people, this means actively strengthening decision-making and control over their organisations, and building on people's personal and collective contributions, and shared commitment to a their organisation's chosen governance processes, goals and identity (Hunt & Smith, 2006). But one of the fundamental challenges to achieving Indigenous community governance is a lack of agreed understandings. Each community is different and local decisions need to be made about:

- Group membership and identity (who is the 'self' in their governance)
- Who has authority within the group, and over what
- Agreed rules to ensure authority is exercised properly and decision makers are held accountable;
- How decisions are enforced;
- How rights and interests with others are negotiated; and
- What arrangements will best enable the achievement of goals (Hunt et al., 2008; Hunt & Smith 2006).

To reach such decisions, the one-sided approaches previously undertaken by governments and others are inadequate. These approaches focus on strengthening the capacity of Indigenous Australians and their organizations, without reflecting on governments' own capacity to understand and engage. Instead, processes for workable collaborative partnerships are needed. Such enabling governance processes can involve researchers, governments and Indigenous communities through two-way capacity enhancement - for government to work through genuine partnerships; and for communities to be better supported to improve their own situations. The question to ask here is: what enabling approaches are available for Indigenous organisations to effectively make these decisions; and more, what approaches can facilitate these processes in partnership?

One strategy that our team has successfully used to achieve these aims in partnership with Indigenous communities is reflective participatory approaches – Participatory Action Research (PAR) often, but not always combined with an Indigenous-developed social and emotional empowerment program – the Family Wellbeing program (Bainbridge, McCalman, Tsey & Brown, 2011). We have used PAR as way of working together to improve governance in schools, in men and women's support groups, and to promote organisational change in community-controlled organisations over many years. In our experience, it is a proven, acceptable, feasible and highly engaging strategy for Indigenous people and others. PAR is a cyclic process that diagnoses the situation at hand; acts to improve it; measures or evaluates the effectiveness of the action; reflects on learnings; and plans next steps (Bainbridge, McCalman, Tsey & Brown, 2011). Although it sounds like a simple process; it is sometimes a really difficult process to facilitate. But it also opens up a space of engagement that makes research relevant to the everyday lives of people, and contributes to community control over issues that are important to them (Tsey et al., 2002). The real significance, lies in the ethical premise of recognising the communities' inherent human resources and in embedding its underlying principles in a process that is oriented toward action – Indigenous communities are tired of no action (Bainbridge, Andrews, & McCalman, 2013a, 2013b). The implementation exercise itself, relies on creativity, responsiveness and intuition to complement what is really a messy and unpredictable process (Bainbridge, Tsey, Andrews & McCalman, 2013a, 2013b).

So, we use established questions to guide and organise the reflective processes:

- how are we going – what's happening;
- what is working,
- what is not;
- are we getting our fair share resources relative to need;
- who is benefiting; who is missing out; what can be done to reach those people; and
- how can we improve our situation (Bainbridge, McCalman, Tsey & Brown, 2011).

The approach, closely akin to continuous quality improvement processes, has been used in Indigenous organisations and government departments. And although they imply a new way of doing business and can be initially challenging for some people, with skillful facilitation, the benefits are that a new type of dialogue emerges; with power somewhat flattened, and understandings built across teams towards agreed strategies. This harnesses motivation and engagement for change. Frameworks like this can be used to engage, stimulate, reflect, monitor, and evaluate transdisciplinary teams and organisational change - canvassing the relevant team or organisational views and attitudes helps participants to be more reflective on their own values and norms and how these might impact on the effectiveness of their practice.

But the process is not always perfect. In a project leading into the cessation of CDEP, for example, we used PAR to bring together social service providers in one discrete Aboriginal community, Yarrabah,

which developed historically from a church mission. The purposes of PAR were to develop a community social and emotional wellbeing action plan; and running parallel to that, a group who sought to focus on engagement into education for Yarrabah students. The first group included both community-controlled and government organisations and was facilitated by a local man – they claimed themselves to be “footsoldiers” – those working at the coalface of the issue. The second group was coordinated by a government department – it had very limited Indigenous community representation, all but one person worked removed from what was happening on the ground, and through the process they struggled to identify their contributions to the issue of engagement – this group quite quickly failed and disbanded despite repeated efforts requesting them to include community input and/or others working in the area. At the same time, the other flourished (Bainbridge, Tsey, Andrews & McCalman, 2013b).

Governance operating at multiple levels

In other work done by our team, a PAR approach was used in a new health initiative where nurses and health workers were required to work together in a team approach - the effective elements framed as empowerment attributes of a transdisciplinary and transcultural teamwork model were identified (Whiteside, Tsey & Cadet-James, 2011). One important thing to notice here in this framework for transdisciplinary and transcultural teamwork, apart from the attributes of empowerment it supports, is that governance is operating at multiple levels – societal, individual, team and organisational (See Table 1).

Table 1: A Framework for Transdisciplinary Teamwork (Whiteside, Tsey & Cadet-James, 2011)

DOMAIN	EMPOWERMENT ATTRIBUTES
Societal	Acknowledge the challenges of history and the social environment Work with community strengths, for example, any form of social support Enable local control and involvement Seek to facilitate community development or change
Individual/Client	Promote autonomy and individual responsibility Acknowledge and build on people’s existing strengths Encourage personal and skill development Respect people’s religious and spiritual beliefs (these can be a source of strength)
Team	Clarify team values Ensure workers have well-defined roles Facilitate cross-cultural understanding Provide forums for reflective practice Be aware of and deal with power differences between workers Have some separate reflective spaces/support for Indigenous workers
Organisational	Employ local people and build capacity Be transparent and listen to workers Ensure client needs are primary Ensure fair and safe conditions for workers Promote training and professional development Address organisational conflict as it arises Adapt to change Adopt evidence-based approach as to what works through research partnerships

Reflecting on that model, it is clear that governance works at different levels, and empowerment processes and capacity are critical for achieving good governance (Tsey, McCalman, Bainbridge & Brown, 2012). Highlighted here is the need to support the empowerment and wellbeing of Indigenous people whether that is at the personal level, community level, or organisational level. This is a key gap arising so often from the evidence-base; and which is particularly pertinent in thinking about capacity strengthening, whether that concerns issues of governance or otherwise.

The importance of strengthening soft capacities alongside hard capacities

Where capacities are not aligned with goals, or optimal, what constitutes strengthening organisational capacity as an enabler of governance; and how do we promote it? Strengthening capacity is about accessing opportunities and processes to enhance an organisation's abilities to perform specific functions, solve problems, and set and achieve goals - to get things done (Hunt & Smith, 2006). But incorporated within capacity strengthening are both hard and soft capacities. Hard capacities refers things such as resources, technical skills, functions, structures, equipment and so forth; while importantly, and often overlooked are the soft capacities: for instance, values, morale, engagement, motivation, incentives and staff wellbeing. To be noted in cross-cultural partnership contexts, however, there is also a need to focus on the cultural and cross-cultural elements, and not work from the assumption that Western approaches will work in Indigenous contexts.

Supporting Indigenous social and emotional empowerment

For capacity enhancement; for Indigenous governance to thrive, a key priority is social and emotional empowerment as a necessary precursor for development. Yet although critically important, empowerment and wellbeing is poorly understood and supported; despite its foundational significance to achieving wider benefits.

Here, a case example of our research partnerships in supporting Indigenous social and emotional empowerment is shared as an illustration of an enabling process in governance. Over the past 15 years, our team has worked through an Indigenous developed social and emotional empowerment program – the Family Wellbeing Program. We use it as a way of enhancing capacity and also as an engagement tool. It was developed in 1993 with, by and for Indigenous Australians - in response to community-identified needs, including for healing resulting from loss and trauma. It aims to enhance participants' capacity to deal with the day-to-day stresses of life and to help others by providing a safe environment in which they can have different conversations than those they might have experienced in the past. Past historical injustices are acknowledged, along with the impact of history on people's lives today. But, rather than remaining immersed in past problems, new conversations occur in the context of people's own stories – stories focussed on personal resilience, strength, and competency (Whiteside, 2009). For instance, one module asks participants asks people to consider people in their family, community or nationally who they admire as leaders; then to think about the qualities demonstrated by those people. Finally they are asked reflect on their own qualities that can be harnessed to be leaders in their own spheres of influence. FWB's usefulness as an empowerment tool is demonstrated in its transfer – it's been transferred over 20 years by three main provider organisations (Adelaide, Alice Springs and Cairns) and their partner organisations to 56 geographical places across Australia – it has also been transferred internationally to Ghana, Papua New Guinea and Canada (McCalman, 2013).

Conclusion

Strengthening the organisational capacity of both Indigenous and government organisations is critical to raising the health, wellbeing and prosperity of Indigenous Australian communities. As reported in our review, of organisational capacity and strengthening Indigenous governance, there are four key messages. First is the importance of evidence and the need to move beyond descriptive research. Second, improving the governance processes of Indigenous organisations is likely to require strengthening of Indigenous and government organisational values, goals, structures and arrangements that influence employees' behaviour and wellbeing. This two-way capacity enhancement will entail governments working through partnerships and communities being better supported to improve their own social and emotional wellbeing. Third was to acknowledge that governance works at different levels which are interrelated. Fourth, involvement of Indigenous people in decision-making about their own development is critical, as is the strengthening of soft capacities alongside the provision of training and resources (Tsey, McCalman, Bainbridge & Brown, 2012). Indigenous empowerment and social and emotional wellbeing underpin capacity strengthening for Indigenous people; but these elements need to be better understood and supported. Pragmatic ways in which we better strengthen capacity include two well-used approaches that are both acceptable and feasible for working in partnership with Indigenous communities - one PAR, a reflective process; and the other, the Family Wellbeing program that taps into, and brings us together through our common humanity.

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