

# **IF WE VALUE THE DIFFERENCE CAN WE MAKE A DIFFERENCE**

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

I would like to start with a little fable that was told to me recently as I believe it will put the remainder of this presentation in context.

Once upon a time there was a place called Eurotopia and the most prestigious sporting occasion was their Grand Prix event. A team of champions from Eurotopian had held the Grand Prix title since living memory. The Grand Prix was a team event with each team being required to complete a three kilometre cross country course.

The Eurotopian team consisted of a fox, a crow and an eel. The Eurotopian management team were enthusiastic, committed and fair people who wanted to ensure that all members had equal status and participated fairly. They achieved this by allocating the first kilometre stage of the race to the crow, and the subsequent 1 kilometre stages to the fox and the eel. The management team decided that travelling by the most direct route on the ground was the safest method as the routes had all been mapped out and they would save time navigating by using the 'tried and tested' ways which had served them well thus far ("If it aint broke – don't fix it").

The crow started running up the road and got away to an excellent start. Team management were quietly confident that the prize was in the bag. The second stage of the course was across water and the final stage traversed a chasm. The fox bravely jumped into the water, and urged on by team management to hang in there, successfully completed his stage of the event. The chasm was extremely steep, and despite his apprehension, the eel showed his commitment to the plan by plunging down the chasm.

Each team member, champions that they were, finished their stages of the event and the Eurotopian management team took much pride in a job well done. They received

high praise and much publicity for completing such a grueling event.

Mind you the fox ended up being treated for water on the lungs, the crow's feet were worn down to the bone and the eel's stomach never recovered from the gravel rash.

The Australians heard about this event and decided to put a team in for the next grand prix. The Australian team consisted of a dingo, a black swan and a platypus. The team management consulted their participants and developed a plan. The dingo was given the first stage along the road, the platypus was given the second stage across the water and the swan was given the third stage across the chasm. Needless to say they completed the event in record time and the event was renamed THE GREAT AUSTRALIAN RACE.

The simple moral to the story being that valuing and utilising the differences can lead to more efficient and effective use of resources and an improved outcome.

We should not provide services that are appropriate for some, but discriminate against others. We may state, and believe, that we do not discriminate in the provision of our services and we provide them openly to all people. If however we forget to take into account whether people can read or write, whether they speak our language, whether they have money and transport to get to our offices, whether they know we even exist, then the services we offer are likely to be inequitable and discriminatory.

Australia has a rich and diverse population. It is a population with a diverse population with different languages, different cultures, different religions and people from different areas.

We have in the main, however, tended to provide our services and focus our service delivery on the dominant Anglo-Australian and predominantly urban population. As with the Eurotopians in the fable, we have done this because it is what we know best, it is the safest course to travel and within our comfort zone. I suggest that we need to ensure that we are consulting and planning with those of the less dominant groups, giving thought to introducing mechanisms that will change the way we currently manage and provide our services. If we do this, our services will become available to all THE GREAT AUSTRALIAN RACE in a more equitable and non-discriminatory manner.

Whilst I appreciate that there are a large number of different groups who would consider that they do not receive an equitable and non-discriminatory service, I will concentrate my presentation on the group I consider to have the greatest need for improved and equitable services in the Northern Territory – the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Within the Northern Territory, Aboriginal people represent 27% of our population and of these 66% live away from the major urban centres on remote communities, outstations and cattle stations. For most, English is a second or third language.

Aboriginal morbidity and mortality is significantly higher than their non-Aboriginal counterparts and over 50% of people accessing the public health system in the Northern Territory are Aboriginal. Aboriginal people are significantly under represented in the complaints process and disproportionately over represented in health service utilisation. For instance, less than 5% of complaints to the Commission this year have been from Aboriginal people.

In accordance with the Conference theme, here is a group of Australians who, unlike the dominant Anglo-Australian population, are clearly experiencing difficulties in accessing services. I would suggest that this is not just a major systemic issue facing the Northern Territory as we approach the new century, but one facing all States and Territories.

Dealing with such an issue requires, I submit, a systemic response which must be underpinned by a commitment to review the values, assumptions and concepts which mould our own systems.

How then, by valuing and utilising the skills and experiences of others, can we develop and implement appropriate complaints mechanisms that will not discriminate against people and will lead to all Australians having improved and equitable access to the complaint handling process?

Some further questions you might ask yourself as you contemplate your answer to that question are:

- Does our organisation have the attitudes which will allow it to extend our services to those who think differently, to those who live differently and to those who communicate differently? Do you have the patience to ascertain details from those who are confused and need to communicate through interpreters? Do you feel as comfortable in the bush or on a remote community as you would behind your desks? Do you have personnel that not only recognise the differences but have the skills to communicate and work within such a different environment?
- Does my organisation have the flexibility to receive complaints presented in a manner which is culturally appropriate to the complainant and which may be different from that used by most complainants? For example it may be more appropriate for Indigenous people living on remote communities to raise complaints through the “story telling” of an elder. We must value these differences and find the flexibility to accommodate this means of making a complaint.

- Does your organisation have the courage to build a Commission which operates differently? Is it one which has the capacity to take into account the particular needs and circumstances of a diverse population?

The following quote comes from a paper prepared by Roberta Jamieson, Ombudsman of Ontario, titled “Reaching (All) the People: Service Equity and the Ombudsman” and is relevant to the theme of my paper and my own organisation.

*“Every Ombudsman in the world has something to teach each of us – but the way you do things must be uniquely your own, appropriately shaped to fit political and economical circumstances, custom, culture and history. I can tell you from our experiences that the magnitude and impact of the changes we would be called upon to make went far beyond what we thought we had to do when we started out. We found, in fact, that we exemplified many of the very characteristics about which our clients were complaining”.*

What I want to present to you today is an example of an approach I am taking within the Health and Community Services Complaints Commission in the Northern Territory which I hope will, by valuing the differences of those we serve and utilising the different skills of those we can employ, make some inroad into providing a more equitable, culturally appropriate and less discriminatory complaints mechanism for Aboriginal people within the Northern Territory.

Whilst the project may be unique to the Territory, I hope the philosophy and principles behind the project and the issues that it has raised will provide food for thought for others. The way ahead is not going to be easy and no doubt mistakes will be made and there will be failures. But to do less would be to concede failure.

I must state at this point that the content of this presentation owes much to the work done by Sharon Clark and Associates and their Report to me titled “**Valuing the Differences to Make a Difference**” and the contribution made by my Deputy Commission, Vic Feldman.

## **2. WHAT WAS MY APPROACH AND WHY**

The Commission in the NT has four employees, including myself, all professionals, all non-Indigenous, all very much representing the public sector status quo. We are bureaucratic in our internal and external relations, are used to being bound by relatively inflexible policies and procedures, and work in a public sector bound by standardisation and efficiency-management philosophies. We act and make decisions based on the perceptions, values and beliefs of our own culture. Our own personal conditioning has taught us

particular ways of viewing the world. We are good at providing services to Anglo-Australians and those people predominantly based in urban centres.

Services that are going to be developed and delivered to Indigenous people, particularly those located outside the major urban areas, need to be capable of working in an environment characterised by people, many of whom:

- live in poor, harsh and remote environments;
- do not necessarily have English as their first language;
- have had only a very basic primary and post primary “Western” education;
- have a different culture - beliefs and values - to other Australians; and
- lack access to, and knowledge of, sophisticated technology.

I consider there is a need to take an approach which empowers and provides an opportunity for Indigenous people to have a strategic impact on the development of a culturally appropriate complaints system.

My difficulty is that I currently have no-one employed in the Commission who is able to adequately understand and convey the needs of Indigenous people, nor to effectively communicate with them in order to develop services that Indigenous people see as appropriate to meet their needs. I have no-one to empower and no-one to provide me with this type of strategic input.

Given the geography and wide distribution of the Aboriginal population in the Northern Territory, the work of the Commission would no doubt be greatly assisted and facilitated by having someone on staff who had the background and knowledge necessary for advising on and assisting in the implementation of culturally appropriate mechanisms for handling complaints from the Aboriginal population. Having someone on staff who could facilitate the development of culturally appropriate mechanisms for Indigenous people to access the Commission, would also have a positive effect on improving accessibility and enhancing awareness of the Commission.

I have commenced a project that hopefully will lead to the employment of an Aboriginal Complaints Officer within the Commission whose primary objectives will be to:

- (i) Research and develop systemic and operational models which will provide and improve access to complaint resolution processes in the health and community services sectors, particularly for Indigenous people in the Northern Territory.
- (ii) Implement the methods and mechanisms developed, to receive and resolve complaints from Indigenous people.

- (iii) Receive and assist with the resolution of health service and community service complaints from all other people throughout the Northern Territory.
- (iv) Provide advice and guidance to the Commission on culturally appropriate methods and mechanisms which aim to provide service equity to Indigenous people.

### **3. A PROJECT TO EMPLOY A TRAINEE ABORIGINAL COMPLAINTS OFFICER**

The project commenced in mid 1998 and will, as I have previously noted, hopefully lead to the employment of a full time Aboriginal Complaints Officer within the Commission. The project was to be in two stages.

#### **(i) Stage 1**

Stage 1, which is complete, was funded to the sum of \$22,000 by the Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DEETYA) and involved the engagement of a consultant to –

- undertake an examination of the office environment - including staff from the Ombudsman's office - in order to gain an understanding of the perceptions of staff and the Office's readiness and ability to successfully facilitate the employment of the an Aboriginal trainee;
- prepare a position and person profile for a trainee Aboriginal Complaints Officer;
- develop a specific training package for the trainee; and
- identify strategies that would facilitate the continued employment of the trainee.

A consultancy firm, Sharon Clark and Associates, was selected because it was able to demonstrate that it had the greatest understanding and knowledge about the task to be undertaken and the needs and issues likely to be encountered with the project. From the very start emphasis was placed on gaining maximum input and direction from Indigenous people.

The consultants completed the tasks over a period of 3 months, culminating in their Report to me titled "**Valuing the Difference to Make a Difference**".

#### **(ii) Stage 2**

Stage 2, which is yet to happen, involves the recruitment and employment of the trainee over a period of 18 months and subsequent full time employment of this person as a Complaint Officer.

DEETYA initially agreed to fund this stage of the project, but due to changes in priorities and Commonwealth government policy they subsequently withdrew their support. As a result, I have approached the NT Government and hope to receive funding for this stage of the project in the 1999/2000 budget.

#### **4. THE ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN**

Although it may be some time before the trainee Aboriginal Complaints Officer is employed by the Commission, it is clear, from the Consultant's report, that there are a number of issues identified as a result of the internal Environmental Scan that I must start to address if I am to successfully facilitate the employment of the trainee Aboriginal Complaints Officer.

Firstly, a little bit of information about the Environmental Scan. It was undertaken as part of the consultancy to gain an understanding of the Office "culture" on a more interpersonal level. It enabled staff to comment on what they thought about a range of work related matters, including bringing Indigenous people into their Office as colleagues.

The Environmental scan was undertaken by surveying staff using qualitative research methods. Staff were individually interviewed in relation to:

- views on working with indigenous staff;
- training and development needs for both non-Indigenous and Indigenous staff; and
- what they thought they might learn from each other.

Staff answers were wide ranging. For the purposes of attitudinal positioning, simplicity and discussion, they were grouped in accordance with their dominant attitudes and values. Although it is acknowledged that there may be some shortcomings in this approach, the groupings do open up discussion.

- The first group we will look at is the **Good Luck to them Group**
  - ◆ Perceive their interaction with the Aboriginal trainees as peripheral.
  - ◆ Their attitudes were characterised as:

*“They’ll fit in alright, because staff were friendly and helpful to me when I started, but I will not really have much to do with them”*

- The next group is the **Comrades Group**
  - ◆ This Group generally reflected the attitudes of staff who had had some level of intensive involvement with Aboriginal people or communities.
  - ◆ They gave the impression that they were positively disposed towards Indigenous people.
  - ◆ They understood that there is another culture out there; one that has intrinsic value and does not need its ways to be substituted for ways of the dominant culture.
  - ◆ They have already learnt from Aboriginal people and were specific about what they expected to learn from the incoming officers.
  - ◆ This Group would be attuned to the need to have an understanding why the Indigenous person took a particular course of action without casting aspersions on their professionalism/competence.
  
- The third group is the **Unaware Group**
  - ◆ This Group gave the impression of having more definite interpretations about appropriate standards of behaviour.
  - ◆ It was perceived they would be more than hospitable provided the incoming Indigenous staff subscribed to their set of standards: “I’ll play ball if you play by my rules.”
  - ◆ Within this type of group would be a view that the dominant culture (their culture) goes about their business in a generally decent manner and they would perhaps not even know that, for example, the lack of eye contact was a sign of respect rather than shiftiness.
  - ◆ There was no mendacity within this Group, rather, there was an atmosphere of willingness to help and teach.
  
- And finally the **Swingers**

- ◆ These individuals move between groups with an ability to achieve **Comrade** status as well as wanting or needing to take a conservative leap back into the **Unaware** group.
- ◆ They are basically conservative but also have an affinity with Indigenous peoples.

Not surprising, an absolute workplace culture was not found.

No doubt many of you can relate to these findings. You may give them different names but I would contend that these groups would not be dissimilar to the results likely to be found in most organisations.

The fact that there is not one absolute workplace culture brings with it its own difficulties and issues.

The Environmental Scan is not complete. The most important element is still to be undertaken. That is the need to look at and explore the external environment of our clients - in this case our Indigenous clients. Who are they? Where are they? What are their needs? We need to gain this knowledge and understanding in order for us to strategically plan, develop and deliver appropriate and equitable services to Indigenous people.

## 5. ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Not only do we have the huge challenge of trying to develop and provide our services in a way that are culturally appropriate, but we have a more immediate challenge to ensure that we recruit, train and retain staff that best understand our Indigenous clients' characteristics and needs and who will be in the best possible position to use these value added skills to facilitate the development of culturally appropriate mechanisms to improve access by Indigenous people to our services.

Equitable service delivery requires that we can critically analyse ourselves and implement a shift in our own cultural beliefs and value systems. This shift must recognise the cultural characteristics of Indigenous people and lead to the development of culturally appropriate mechanisms for them to access the services of the Commission – a systemic change.

What I am proposing is that the internal culture of an organisation (as identified in my own organisation's environmental scan) brings with it challenges and issues that must be addressed if we are to effectively employ and utilise the skills of Indigenous people and deliver services appropriate to our clients needs.

Some of these issues are:

- (a) **There is likely to be conflict between the internal standards of performance expected from an Indigenous employee by the Commission and those expected from the external Indigenous population.**

The Indigenous employee will be part of a fundamentally conservative agency and will recognise that on occasions his/her people are not getting the level or type of service they need from the Government or, in my case, from the Commission.

There will be times when their people are more likely to need an agency that can perceive and identify mechanisms to resolve issues in a fundamentally different way to that likely to be utilised by the Commission.

A challenge, for Health Complaints Commissions such as ours, is, I suggest, to meet the expectations of Indigenous employees by providing a level of service delivery to our Indigenous clients that redresses the current situation which is seen as inappropriate and unequitable.

The expectations placed on the Indigenous employee by their people will likely be far greater than those placed on them by the organisation.

- (b) **There may be pressure on the Indigenous employee to accept full responsibility for the success or otherwise of a culturally appropriate complaint process.**

If a Commission engages Indigenous staff and then does not implement culturally appropriate mechanisms for accessing the Commission and for receiving and handling complaints from Indigenous people, it is likely there will be few complaints received. If the Indigenous Officers do not have the support, knowledge, skills and experience to deal with this situation they may experience difficulty in sustaining their appointment. Most likely, they will also be criticised by their own people.

It is essential therefore that the Indigenous Officer has the value added skills – cross-cultural communication, knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal values and beliefs and acceptance by Indigenous people – to be able to effectively cope with these difficulties.

- (c) **The expectation that the Indigenous employee will play a major role in increasing other non-Indigenous employee's cultural knowledge and awareness.**

The skills, knowledge and experiences Indigenous employees bring with them (in terms of performing in a cross cultural setting in a Government agency) are going to be important.

Whilst they may use these skills, knowledge and experience to educate and bring increased cultural awareness and understanding to other non-Indigenous staff, they should not be expected to enlighten everyone -

particularly the **Unaware Group** who may be only able to consider such matters within the context of their own beliefs and values. Ultimately responsibility for raising awareness must lie with the manager.

(d) **It will be easy for the Indigenous employee to offend certain non-Indigenous groups of employees:**

The Indigenous employee is not likely to have any difficulty communicating with the **Comrade Group** within an Office.

However when it comes to the **Unaware Group** the skills, knowledge and experience of the Indigenous employee will be put to the test. Depending on how quickly the **Unaware Group** place people in boxes and leave them there, any incoming Indigenous employee could unknowingly offend a member of the **Unaware Group**, and from that point on, communication could be affected. It might be a trivial thing such as using the wrong coffee mug. This will then reflect on the lack of experience/insight of both employees in being able to value the background, role, differences and priorities of others.

(e) **The Indigenous employee may become too emersed in the non-Indigenous culture:**

The incoming Indigenous employee may be experienced enough to be able to immerse him or herself in the dominant culture of the organisation, thus showing excellence in the “desirable” office standards expected from all the different groups.

Within the organisation the Indigenous employee would then be likely to take on a “cultureless” persona making him or her indistinguishable from anyone else in the organisation and therefore much more integrated into the existing organisational persona.

Should the Indigenous employee begin to provide services to Aboriginal people in a way that is substantially no different from non-Indigenous employees, his/her services to these people, and therefore to the Commission, may be significantly diminished.

(f) **The need for Indigenous employees to accept responsibility and accountability:**

The different staff Groups will often have differing views on how they think the Indigenous employee should be treated. Some will suggest that they be treated the same as everyone else while others will see the need for them to be accommodated differently.

Managers must have the ability to make Indigenous employees feel their cultural needs are not being ignored, that they are recognised and valued for their cultural differences, knowledge, etc but, at the same time, ensure

they are aware and accept the need for an appropriate level of responsibility, accountability and productivity.

Thought needs to be given by managers to the performance measures that they set for all employees to ensure that they are appropriate and achievable. We need to be careful that we do not set Indigenous employees up to fail because our expectations in the first place have been unrealistic.

- (g) **The non-Indigenous employees may not appreciate and recognise the significance of the value added skills, knowledge and experiences that the Indigenous employee will bring with them.**

The Indigenous employee will be employed because he or she meets the requirements of the position and has specific skills, knowledge and experience that the non-Indigenous staff do not have. Their understanding of Aboriginal culture, their acceptance among the Aboriginal community, their ability to communicate with their own people and their understanding of the needs and characteristics of Indigenous people are all skills that should be highly regarded and valued by all employees.

## **6. HOW CAN WE MAKE A DIFFERENCE?**

We can make a difference by beginning to understand our Indigenous clients needs and characteristics better and by employing staff who have that understanding and knowledge. We can make a difference by changing the current public sector paradigm from one of designing and providing services to the dominant non-Indigenous and predominantly urban population to one of providing a diverse range of services in a culturally appropriate manner across urban, rural and remote areas of Australia.

This is our chance to make a difference. Some of you may have already started. Others may be just thinking about it. I hope by now, however, you are all at least starting to look at and question your current policies, processes and practices.

For myself, I now appreciate that I must begin to think and act differently. I must accept the fact that what will be OK and work in one culture may not be appropriate or workable in another. I must encourage flexibility and initiative. And I must listen to those who do know, who are client focused and who understand the needs of Indigenous people – the Indigenous people themselves.

If I do these things I believe I will be in a far better position to successfully employ a Aboriginal Complaints Officer and develop and provide an effective complaint handling services for Indigenous people.

I am aware that budgets are not infinite, but believe we can still undertake many changes without the need for significant costs to be incurred. To again quote from the paper by Ms Roberta Jamieson “Money also helps, but many of the changes required have to do with our minds, not our pocket-books, with our attitudes, not our budgets”. I also appreciate that what might work and be acceptable in the Northern Territory may not be workable or acceptable elsewhere. For this reason I was loath to offer any particular solutions as part of this presentation. However, what I would like to do is make some suggestions that I believe might make a difference if implemented.

## **6.1 EMPLOYING INDIGENOUS STAFF**

Some activities that may make a difference and assist in the successful recruitment and employment of Aboriginal Complaint Officers are:

### **(a) Spend time to develop the job and person profile**

In developing these profiles you may like to consider the following:

- The functions and responsibilities allocated to these positions should align with, and complement, the organisation’s objectives, structures and key relationships. They must clearly demonstrate their validity in terms of organisational outcomes.
- In designing the position’s duties, it is important to ensure that they are seen as an essential component to the organisation meeting its objectives and accepting its responsibilities.
- The interpersonal skills, maturity, professionalism and experience required of the person should not be underestimated. Is the position appropriate for someone just out of school, or University for that matter? Does it require someone with previous work experience, life skills and a mature attitude? What about their acceptability to other Indigenous people?
- The **value added competencies** that the employee will bring - cross-cultural communication, acceptance by Indigenous people and the ability to liaise with key stakeholders - are the essential components of the position that will be required by the Indigenous employee to deal with the specific client/target group.

All these things must be considered, decided upon and valued.

### **(b) Develop a comprehensive training program that facilitates maximum flexibility and can be individually customised for Aboriginal Complaint Officers dependent on the level of skills and experience with which they are recruited.**

Some components that could form part of such a program are:

- **Induction:** This will provide the Indigenous employee with a clear understanding of the organisation's role and operations.
- **Shadowing:** This consists of the Indigenous employee working with, and assisting, other employees working in different areas of the organisation. It will allow the employee to gain an insight into the various activities of the organisation.
- **Outplacement:** This relates to the secondment of the Indigenous employee to other similar organisations in order to gain access to the skills and experience of best practice models elsewhere.
- **Formal Off-the-Job Training Packages:** Formally recognised education and training packages need to be identified and accessed by the Indigenous employee. This will complement the work related experiences and improve the employees skills and knowledge base.
- **Research Project:** The Indigenous employee should be given the opportunity to demonstrate how his or her skills can add value to the organisation. The undertaking of a targeted and relevant research project can do this. It will also give the Indigenous employee a vehicle by which he or she can apply any new knowledge and skills gained.

### (c) Mentoring

It is important that there is put in place at the outset a supportive environment. This can best be achieved by identifying and appointing someone as a mentor for the Indigenous employee.

This person needs to be someone in a senior position who has the ability to transfer his or her skills and knowledge to others, recognises and values the differences and is respected by his or her peers.

### (d) Resource Provision

A program of this nature cannot be successfully implemented without the allocation of adequate resources. Funding is required for salaries, office equipment, travel and other operational expenses. There will also be costs associated with any formal training.

As an example only, I estimate that the cost to implement a program such as I have described within the NT would be between \$50,000 and \$60,000 per annum.

The following quote from the Consultant's report is very relevant to the employment of Indigenous staff:

*"It is stating the obvious but Indigenous officers need to be treated as employees who have as much right to good*

*management, mentoring, security and dignity as non-Indigenous staff. Good management dictates that an appropriate level of supervision is required at all stages that allows the individual to develop 'ownership', freedom to be creative, to take risks and have a realistic level of confidence that they can competently perform the duties of their respective positions."*

## **6.2 UNDERSTANDING THE INDIGENOUS CLIENT BETTER**

Some suggestions that might lead to a better understanding of our Indigenous clients' needs and improved service delivery are:

### **(a) Employment of Indigenous Employees**

I have already discussed this in some detail previously. It is the value added competencies of the Indigenous employee that bring about the improved understanding and knowledge necessary within an organisation to facilitate the development of culturally appropriate services for our Indigenous clients.

### **(b) Understand their needs and service requirements**

As mentioned earlier, we need to undertake a detailed environmental scan of our Indigenous clients so that we can obtain a clear and accurate picture of who they are, what their needs are and how these needs might be best serviced.

Needless to say the people best placed to undertake this process, in a way that is likely to elicit accurate and appropriate information, are our own Indigenous employees.

It is impossible to explore options and develop culturally appropriate services without first fully understanding our clients and their needs.

### **(c) Develop and implement appropriate service delivery solutions**

Once we have finished the external environmental scan, I consider there are a number of actions that we should take in order for us to meet our ultimate goal of effectively deliver services to our Indigenous clients.

These actions might include the following:

- **Explore different options:** It is important that at this stage we do not discourage innovation. There may be different options and solutions required than those needed for the traditional (Anglo-Australian) complaints resolution model. Lets face it, the problems associated with servicing Indigenous people are not new and no one has found a totally effective solution yet.

- **Decide what is achievable:** Issues that might be considered include; what are peoples' expectations, what is affordable and what is acceptable. In deciding what is achievable it is important that solutions are customised to suit the situation (eg. solutions affecting urban Indigenous people will most likely be different to those affecting remote Indigenous people).
- **Implement achievable solutions:** This should be done in partnership with the Indigenous people affected.
- **Monitor, review, evaluate and continually improve services:** This should be undertaken as a result of and in response to client needs and in accordance with resource capability.

**(d) Develop and deliver education and awareness programs throughout Aboriginal communities**

We need to develop and deliver access and awareness programs and educational information in a way that will be relevant and understood by our Indigenous clients. This information needs to be delivered to all communities, whether remote or urban, where possible by our Indigenous employees.

Of particular significance is the need to provide this information in a language and a style that will be understood. Due to the remoteness of many Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory, language and literacy issues and the different cultural beliefs and values, the implementation of these strategies is going to provide a significant challenge for my Commission.

**(e) Review processes and procedures to streamline and remove any access barriers for Aboriginal people**

We need to remove barriers to the handling, investigation and resolution of complaints by Indigenous people. This could possibly include the use of Interpreters, the acceptance of verbal complaints, the movement away from lengthy comprehensive written reports which require a high degree of literacy, the ability to resolve complaints at the community level rather than at an individual level and the employment of Indigenous staff.

**(f) Increase the cross-cultural knowledge and understanding of our staff**

Indigenous people do not come from one homogenous culture. An awareness of the complexity and diversity of the different groups' issues should be fully appreciated by those who are attempting to provide these services. It is important to understand and accurately articulate Indigenous clients' needs. Failure to get this right can result in ill-defined

and inappropriate responses and services. Consequently it is important that all staff are cognisant of cross cultural issues.

Therefore, it is important that our current employees are exposed to and understand the issues relating to working in a cross-cultural setting. It is also important that they are able to recognise and value the different knowledge, experiences and skills that the Indigenous employee will bring with them to the organisation.

Our employees must gain an understanding of how to effectively utilise this additional knowledge and skill to the advantage of the organisation and our clients. They must be encouraged, if they have not already done so, to undertake training in this area. To do these things will at least maximise our chances of successfully implementing a Aboriginal Complaint Officer in Training Program.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

I would like to conclude by quoting from the final section of the consultant's report.

*“A systemic approach that recognises the impact of cultural matters on the wellbeing of Indigenous peoples as outlined in this program, may sow the seeds for the missing links in Aboriginal health service delivery.*

*This represents an opportunity to demonstrate how valuing the differences can make a real difference.*

*The rationale that underpins the project is not new and the rhetoric has been presented in many forums and formats. However, the implementation of this program demands more. The continued vision, leadership and commitment that has been demonstrated thus far by those major players involved, with a commitment of sufficient resources, is vital to bring it to fruition”.*

Ladies and gentlemen do we have the vision, leadership and commitment to make a difference?