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Indigenous staff development using action learning in a large government business enterprise

Arch Stevenson¹
Selva Abraham²

Abstract

This study investigates implementation of a staff development program for Indigenous staff using action learning in a Government Business Enterprise (GBE), namely, Australia Post. The aim of the study is to address the knowledge gap about Australian Indigenous staff development using an action learning approach. The action learning approach used in the GBE is outlined under methodology. A review by the action research group at the conclusion of two staff development programs noted that 19 of the 20 participants would graduate at Certificate 3 standard. There is now a core group of Indigenous employees who can move to higher level studies as well as acting as role models for future Indigenous recruits.

The paper makes a contribution to policy and practice in the area of work-based Indigenous staff development. It also contributes to the current literature on human resource development particularly in the area of staff development for Indigenous staff. Thus this study benefits those with responsibility for Indigenous staff development policies and practices within large private and public sector organisations in Australia. For example, it is a reference document for state based Human Resource Managers throughout Australia Post.

Keywords : Staff development, indigenous staff development, action learning, government enterprise

Introduction

Little research has been undertaken or written on Australian Indigenous staff development using action learning, apart from the work of Abraham (1994) with Indigenous communities in Australia. At the time of reporting no published research has been found with regard to Indigenous staff development in GBEs in particular .

This study aims to address that knowledge gap. The GBE used in this study is the South Australia/Northern Territory (SA/NT) administration of Australia Post.

¹ Research Fellow at Gibaran Graduate School of Business.

² Professor at Gibaran Graduate School of Business.

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The conclusions and recommendations from this study were also aimed at implementation by Australia Post in the context of the Corporation's national Indigenous employment strategy. The study will also contribute to policy and procedures relating to Indigenous staff development within other large public/private organisations in Australia.

Background

In the mid 1980s, the then Federal Labor Government made the following commitment in its Aboriginal Employment Development Policy (AEDP Policy Paper No.2 1987, p.11):

All Commonwealth Departments and Authorities are to develop recruitment strategies to ensure that a minimum of 1 to 2% of the Commonwealth workforce is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, and the development of career development strategies which emphasise the acquisition of managerial and other skills to ensure that Indigenous people are equitably represented at all levels of employment.

To support the gaining of managerial skills by Indigenous people, there were to be in excess of 400 career development programs introduced for existing public sector staff. These were to commence by 1990. The Australian public service and State and Territory public sectors continue to be the major employers of Indigenous people with 28% of all Indigenous jobs. They have, however, achieved neither the employment targets nor the anticipated career development results. Indigenous staff continue to be over represented at the lower salary levels of the public sector with the majority restricted to the ASO1 and 2 levels (Australian Government Workplace Diversity Report, 1998-99). The private sector has fared no better where currently around 25% of all Indigenous workers are in labouring type jobs, compared to less than 10% of other Australian workers (Aboriginal Employment and Training Summit May 2000).

Since the launch of the Corporate Leaders for Indigenous Employee program in 1999, a number of companies have made some progress in developing Indigenous staff. Recorded examples include Qantas, Deacons, Euresst and Rio Tinto who have each implemented programs to employ and develop Indigenous people within their workforce. The programs have ranged from apprenticeship and hospitality training through to the sponsoring of law students through the National Indigenous Cadetship Project (DEWR 2002a, 2002b, 2003). However, little research has been undertaken on Indigenous work-based learning using action learning.

The Australian Government Indigenous Employment Policy (IEP) which has been progressively implemented since July 1999 focuses on creating opportunities for Indigenous people in the private sector (DEWR 2006). In 2000, up to 70% of all jobs held by Indigenous people were reliant to some extent on public funding. In an effort to increase and improve the quality of Indigenous employment in the private sector the then Federal Coalition Government reached an agreement with 23 Australian business leaders in May 1999. The business leaders committed to 'develop and implement measures to provide equal employment opportunity for Indigenous staff in the private sector'. (Reith 1999).

As one of Australia's largest GBEs, Australia Post has a commitment to Indigenous employment that dates back to the mid 1980s. Although Australia Post decided not to

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become a signatory to the Corporate Leaders for Indigenous Employment Agreement, the Corporation had been formally involved in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander recruitment and career development strategies since 1988. This commitment to improving Indigenous employment is driven from the top with Australia Post's then Managing Director originally setting a target of 500 Indigenous staff to be employed by Australia Post nationally by 30 June 2001 (Australia Post Workplace Diversity Business Strategy 1998-2001). This employment pledge was cascaded down to each State operation, with Australia Post SA/NT) having had a target of 60 employees to be achieved by 30 June 2000. The national target was subsequently increased to 750 to be achieved by June 2005 (Australia Post Indigenous Employment and Business Strategy 2002-2005). This target was achieved and Indigenous staff currently represent 1.5% of all Australia Post employees. Although there is a strong commitment to recruitment and retention of Indigenous staff within Australia Post, staff development programs to date have generally been ad-hoc and not directed at the specific needs of Indigenous staff.

Indigenous recruits have historically had lower levels of education than many other employees of Australia Post and this is reflected in them being largely employed in base level operational positions. Australia Post's position is reflected in industry generally where nearly a quarter of all jobs held by Indigenous people are for unskilled work compared to less than 10% for the total workforce (Diversity@Work Australia, 2006). Beyond induction and basic operational training, staff development programs involving Indigenous staff have not necessarily achieved outcomes that either met their personal needs or provided satisfactory results for Australia Post. This has meant that Australia Post has lost capable Indigenous staff to other organisations and is yet to fully benefit from whatever potential there is within the Indigenous employee group.

Australia Post is similar to many other Australian organisations, both public and private, in its failure to develop its Indigenous staff to their full capacity. Indigenous employment targets are set, and in many cases achieved, however, examples of those employees progressing to supervisory/managerial ranks of the organisations are rare. Of the 62 Indigenous staff employed by Australia Post SA/NT, as at June 2000 only three were employed above the base level.

Thus it is apparent that little work has been done in the area of Indigenous staff development in GBEs, with more emphasises being placed on reaching employment targets for Indigenous people. There is, therefore, a need for the development and implementation of a staff development program for Indigenous staff of GBEs. The site of the research was Australia Post SA/NT.

The focus of the present study is the question:

Can an action research method and action learning process (ARAL) be used to develop and implement a work-based learning model for the development of Indigenous staff in a large Government Business Enterprise (GBE)?

The corollary research questions this leads to are:

1. Was the work-based model effective in the implementation of the first program of Indigenous participants of the GBE?
2. What were the changes introduced to the work-based model for the second group of Indigenous participants of the GBE based on the views of the participants, the facilitators and the AR Group members?
3. Was the work-based model effective in the implementation of the second group of Indigenous participants in the GBE?
4. Did this training and development program demonstrate the work-based learning model's effectiveness?

Methodology

Research design

The research design involved a conceptual stage and an action research stage. The conceptual phase of the study involved the researcher's own insights in the development of Indigenous staff in Australia Post and the reading of literature relevant to the study. The theoretical framework included the role of human resource development and in particular the different staff development models used to provide employees with competencies to meet current and future job demands.

The second, action research phase provided an updated review of action research literature which was used to form the basis of the action research model developed for use in this study. The data gathering techniques which involved surveys, participant observation and interviews enabled one data collection method to be compared with others through triangulation to verify the validity of the data, and to aid in its interpretation.

The methodology used

The methodology used in any study should depend on the purpose of the study. Patton (1990, p.150) states that 'purpose is the controlling force in research. Decisions about design, measurements, analysis, and reporting all flow from purpose ... the first step ... is getting clear about purpose'. Similarly, in discussing the relationship between purposes and process (methodology), Walcott (1992, p.7) comments that:

Research purpose is the only basis on which decisions about process can be made; the clearer the purpose, the clearer the ways to achieve it..., this key feature of qualitative research begins with the phrase, 'The purpose of this study is ...'. The fewer the words needed, the better...

Therefore, the type of research method used in a study is primarily dependent on the purpose of the study and what the researcher hopes to achieve. Action research was used because it

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fitted the staff development aims of the research. The action research method provided a framework for monitoring the program and had the action research features of: problem focus, action orientation, cyclical process, collaboration, ethical, scientific (in gathering and analysing data) re-educative for members of the action research group and the action learning sets, emancipatory, natural, normative and group based. The model used the action learning process and this resulted in Indigenous participants gaining competencies in the workplace rather than gaining only knowledge. Specifically, the action learning process allowed for translation of knowledge to action as evidenced in the study.

Consider how action research can be identified in more detail. Hart and Bond (1995, p.60) reinforce Carr and Kemmis' (1986) view that the two basic aims of action research are to improve and to involve. Greenwood and Levin (1998, p.4) stated that action research is social research carried out by a team encompassing a professional action researcher and members of an organisation or community seeking to improve their situation. They went on further to state that action research referred to the conjunction of three elements: research, action and participation. They considered that unless all three elements were present the process could not be called action research (1998, p. 6). The bringing about of practical improvement, innovation, change or development of social practice through action research were views shared by both Zuber-Skerritt (1991, p.83) and Cunningham (1993, p.9). In other words, action research is a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social (including educational) situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of (a) their own social or educational practices, (b) their understanding of these practices, and (c) the situation in which the practices are carried out.

In addition, Dick and Swepson (1997) emphasised that action research is typically cyclic and the later cycles are used to challenge and refine the results of the earlier cycles. They contend that it is usually both qualitative and participative. They go on further to state that most of the time action research uses natural language rather than numbers as the use of natural language suits a paradigm which is participative and responsive to the situation.

In summary, a survey of writers undertaken by Peters and Robinson (1984) identified 15 characteristics of action research including 12 general characteristics. Abraham (1994) confirmed the 12 general characteristics and they are summarised at Table 1. At Table 2 the researcher has confirmed that the 12 general characteristics were all evident in this research.

Table 1 Characteristics of action research (Adapted from Abraham 1994)

12 Characteristics of action research	
1. Problem focused	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The focus should be on a real life problem with its solving contributing to social science knowledge.
2. Action oriented	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Plans and actions need to be developed to solve the problem. The diagnosis of a problem and the development of the plan is considered to be action oriented when it becomes part of the process to implement the plan.
3. Cyclical process	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The cycles of planning, action, observation and reflecting are an integral part of action research. As each cycle is completed the results are reviewed and improvements are incorporated into the next cycle.
4. Collaborative	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Team effort and problem solving in a participative manner is an integral part of action research. Another important characteristic of action research is the collaboration between the researcher and the subject organisation.
5. Ethical	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The ethical basis of action research is paramount as the results involve a group within the organisation with limited powers. The researcher must ensure that his/her views do not dominate that of the group.
6. Experimental	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• This allows the researcher to test theories and hypotheses.
7. Scientific	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Action research must ensure that the research is conducted in such a way that it is able to defend itself against criticism of lack of scientific rigour.
8. Re-educative	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Action research does contribute to change in the knowledge base of those involved and also how they view a situation.
9. Emancipatory	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The aim is to improve the lives of those involved in the action research project.
10. Naturalistic	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• This involved the collection of qualitative and descriptive data in real world situations.
11. Normative	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Not only must the social norms of the group be considered there is also the opportunity to bring about change in the group.
12. Group dynamics	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The ability of the group to work as a team will influence the results of the action research

Table 2 Justifying action research methodology as a research method

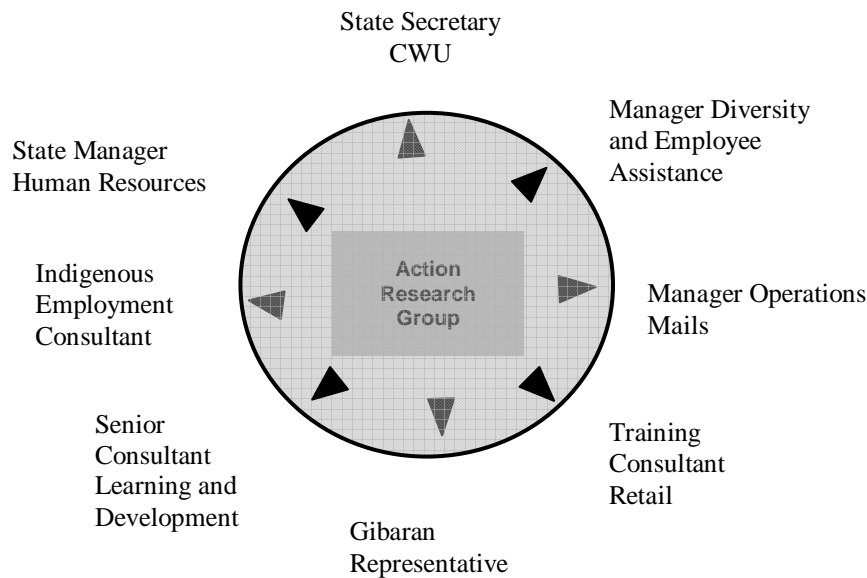
CHARACTERISTICS SUMMARISED	JUSTIFICATION
1. Problem focused	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• This research investigated the implementation of a staff development program for Indigenous employees within Australia Post using action learning. And as such was problem focused.
2. Action oriented	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• This research was action oriented as the group members were required to continuously review the effectiveness of action learning.
3. Cyclical process	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• This research was wide ranging as it involved two major cycles and a number of mini cycles within each major cycle.
4. Collaborative	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Collaboration was clear from the beginning with this research both amongst the group and within the organisation itself.
5. Ethical	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• This research involved developing actions to assist Indigenous staff development.
6. Experimental	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• This characteristic of action research did not emerge in this study.
7. Scientific	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• This research involved participant observation, questionnaires and interviews, combined with triangulation to ensure the data was reliable and valid
8. Re-educative	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• This research met this through members of the group gaining an understanding of action learning and how to work together
9. Emancipatory	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• This was achieved as the result obtained was an improved staff development program for Indigenous employees
10. Naturalistic	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The research involved a real life setting with direct involvement of the participants
11. Normative	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• This was achieved as members of the group interacted together and influenced each others in the way they looked at situations
12. Group Dynamics	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• During the action research cycles effective teamwork became evident even though the members came from different areas and came to the project with different sets of values.

In brief, action research was an appropriate methodology for this research. It was divided into three sub sections: research site, action research group and action research techniques/phases.

The research site was Australia Post SA/NT. The majority of Indigenous staff were employed in either the Mails Business Unit or Retail Business Unit. At the commencement of the study there were 62 Indigenous staff within Australia Post SA/NT. It was expected that the employees involved in this study would be the first group to undertake any form of structured Indigenous staff development program within Australia Post.

In turn, the action research group was made up of eight members. Four were employees of the then Human Resources Unit of Australia Post SA/NT who had accountability within the organisation for functions that related directly to the aim of the study. The other four came from areas that had an interest in the findings of the study. This included the two Business Units within Australia Post where the majority of Indigenous staff are employed, the State Secretary of the Union that has industrial coverage for the positions and a representative from Gibaran being the provider of the customised program. Figure 1.1 represents the action research group diagrammatically.

Figure 1 1 Action research group



The data collection and analysis is a mix of qualitative and quantitative data was collected to enable strengthening of the interpretation, known as 'triangulation' (Patton, 1990, 2002). Three types of methods were used: focus groups discussion, participant observation by the researcher/members of the AR Group and self reports of participants. From these methods three main types of data were gathered: documents (records of meetings); participant observation (self- reports and records of processes); and survey questionnaires (written responses from participants to formal and informal prompting by the researchers).

As this was a highly participative process among the group (the majority of whom were unskilled in research methods,) it was important that the data analysis be kept simple and transparent to those involved. Thus the data was analysed in the following manner:

1. Triangulation of data of self reports of:
 - each participant
 - the supervisor of each participant
 - the facilitators of the program.
2. Content analysis was undertaken on the triangulated data to draw conclusions from those findings.

Now consider the staff development program of this research project: the roles of the action research group, supervisors/mentors, the Gibaran facilitators and program participants. The roles of the members of the action learning set (i.e., the participants in the program) are based on improving effectiveness at work, ensuring task and project completion and undertaking learning through assignments.

The role of supervisor/mentors focused on ensuring clarity of goals, assisting in the selection of tasks and project, coaching and guidance, and instilling confidence in the set members to undertake and complete the tasks and ultimately the project. The mentors were chosen for their ability to provide coaching and guidance to the participants. Some of the mentors had been participants on previous programs and had a good understanding of what was required in this development program. The Gibaran facilitators had the role of knowledge transfer, ensuring integration of tasks and learning and conducting the assessment of participants in the development program as well as the projects.

The action research group consisted of members with accountability within the organisation for functions that related directly to the aim of the study. Other members came from areas that had an interest in the findings of the study and included business unit managers with the largest groups of indigenous employees. The action research group members took up two roles. The first was to observe the work-based learning processes and reflect with the work-based learning set and the AR Group members. The second role was to observe and work with the Gibaran facilitator and the participants to address learning issues during the workshop sessions.

Prior to the commencement of the program, a one day assessment centre was used to establish the individual readiness and capability of the 20 indigenous employees to undertake development at Certificate III level. The assessment centre was structured around group exercises, behavioural interviews, written assessments and completing a personality profile. The 20 indigenous employees were all considered ready and capable to undertake the development and ten of these were placed on the first of two planned programs.

The first module of the program focused on the area of the self and self in relation to teams and problem solving. The focus on self was designed to help participants understand their own work situation. This led on to work structure and reporting responsibilities and then into problem solving and decision making. A range of issues relating to group dynamics and how

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groups make decisions was also covered. The idea of work based learning was introduced at this point along with the action learning process of plan, act, observe and reflect.

Miles and Huberman (1984, p.228) describe how the field researcher constructs an evidential trail. To investigate the impact of the ARAL approach in the implementation of a staff development program for Indigenous staff there had to be a 'logical chain of evidence'. In this study there were two main action research cycles and three mini cycles within the two main cycles. During each of the mini-cycles the AR group went through the action research process of planning, acting, observing and reflecting. The 'logical chain of evidence' undertaken in this study was assembled and recorded in detail.

During the first module of the first program, a degree of frustration appeared among some group members as the combination of lack of computer skills and the feeling that the workload was getting on top of them. The frustration was countered through immediate assistance to those requiring support. In many cases their confidence returned when they were reassured that they were on the right track. At this point, an action research group meeting was held. At this meeting it was felt that over the four days of the module, participants gained confidence in their own skills, knowledge and experience and participants were now assisting each other to achieve results. The development of computer skills was highlighted as an area that needed to be addressed. The role of mentors was discussed and it was stated that some of the participants were apprehensive about using mentors. It was agreed that participants should perhaps have a greater role in mentor selection. It had been observed that participants felt more comfortable with each other and it was agreed that a networking arrangement should be developed. It was agreed that the mentors should be brought together before the next learning module and they should also be contacted early to see how the participants were progressing.

The second module commenced with a discussion on the group project and assurances that sufficient time would be allowed to complete it. This helped reduce the anxiety levels amongst the group. Working in teams was covered both in the work environment and outside of work. Coverage was also given to conflict and negotiation. The work-based learning formula of $WBL = K + PQ$ was again reinforced. The next stage in relation to working in teams, such as the role of teams and their optimum size was also covered. The participants showed a keen interest in understanding team working as it was a process that had only recently been introduced within Australia Post. The module was completed with a small group exercise on a conflict issue and the use of assertiveness, which was alien to many participants. The module ended with participants working on their projects and utilising one on one assistance with the Gibaran facilitators.

At the second action research group meeting, the group reflected on what had occurred to date and whether any changes needed to be made prior to the next module. It was noted that it is difficult for indigenous people to praise themselves and it was felt that feedback could be provided to each participant later in the program to assist in this regard. It was observed that the confidence level of participants had risen and that the sharing of work experiences amongst the group would not have occurred a few weeks ago. It was also reported that the program was being watched by senior management and that the Union was very pleased and felt other companies could learn from the experience. No major changes were planned for the next module.

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The third module was increased from three to four days to give participants more time to complete their written requirements and also spend time with their mentors, who were to attend the last afternoon. This module allowed for small group discussion on assignments and the learning that has occurred. The module had a key focus on teams and team members with respect to setting and managing goal specific roles and performance requirements. It also covered managing information in the workplace and provided time to reflect on project implementation and reporting.

At the third action research group meeting, the reflection was on observations over the three learning modules. The program was seen as a great achievement for this group of indigenous participants and it was agreed that there may be opportunities for some participants to move onto FMI 4 programs. It was agreed that the shorter time frame for the program of four months instead of six months helped to maintain the momentum of the program and was a plus. As an opportunity to further develop their leadership skills it was agreed by the AR Group that the current group of participants could be involved as co-mentors in any future programs. A further discussion centred on the pros and cons of a mixture of Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants in future programs without reaching any conclusion. The AR Group agreed that the results achieved had met and in some cases exceeded expectations. Any future program would gain from the outcomes of this initial program.

The second program followed the pattern of the first program with ten more Indigenous participants. The tasks for the first module were to look at self, self in relation to the team, problem solving, strengths and weaknesses and selection of projects. At the action research group meeting, the reflection was that the participants were interacting easily and well and the mentors and co-mentors were also working well. It was felt that as long as participants stayed on top of their work very few changes were necessary.

With the second module of the second program the first issue was progress with assignments. With some up to date and others with work to do, the importance of keeping up to date was reinforced to the whole group. The tasks in this second module focused on my team, work culture, effective teams, conflict and negotiation and project plans.

At the next action research group meeting, the group reflected on the results of the second learning module. It was noted that in the first program the final module was extended to four days and that this should be considered for this program even to the extent of extending it to five days to ensure all areas are covered. It was also agreed that those participants who were up to date could assist others who were struggling and that mentors could have a greater involvement. It was interesting to note that although the first program involved participants from the assessment centre who were considered better qualified to undertake the program, the current participants appeared to generally have more confidence in themselves and their results were at least equal to the first group.

For the final module of the program, the decision was made to extend it to five days. This would allow time for completion of all tasks. The key tasks for this module were performance and goal achievement for teams and team members, managing information and project implementation and reporting. Extending the learning module by two days was to allow the participants to work on and complete all outstanding tasks. This assistance gave an added incentive to some of the participants who were struggling to finish. The end result was

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that although there was still some outstanding work at the end of day five all participants would complete their tasks.

At the final action research group meeting, discussion and reflection was centred on the program outcome and the next steps. Reflection on the outcome of the program drew positive responses and while there was pressure on participants they had succeeded and achieved good results. The next step was potentially seen as Australia Post licensing the program and using its own staff as future facilitators.

The original aim of the program had been achieved in that there was now a core group of Indigenous employees who were at Certificate Level 3 standard and could move on to higher academic development and supervisory positions within or outside of Australia Post. They would also be role models for future Indigenous recruits.

Key learning

Following the completion of all three learning modules, the participants were asked to reflect on what they had learnt. In summary, it was agreed that they now handle conflict more effectively through negotiation and were more comfortable in presenting in front of people. They were more conscious of their own strengths and weaknesses, being flexible and the significance of team work. They now understood the importance of goal setting and targets. Written skills had also been markedly improved.

The final module of the first of the programs was extended from three to four days to provide more time for participants to complete project work. The extension proved to be beneficial for the first group of participants and when this was reviewed during the second program, the decision was made to extend the final module from three to five days. The key learning from these reflections and actions was that each group is different and that future programs of this nature should allow for a degree of flexibility in the length of modules. The groups of participants also gained a respect for the skills and knowledge that were present in the groups and that could be harnessed and built by the participants as they completed their projects. The key learning from this is to ensure that this respect for skills and knowledge is utilised in the future in other projects as well as in the day to day work of participants in their workplaces within Australia Post.

From a process perspective, the key learning is that action research action learning is a method that requires those using it to be open to reflecting on the process regularly and making changes that will help achieve the outcome. An area where this occurred in this case was the decision to extend the third module of the two programs to facilitate completion of project work. The role and use of mentors and co-mentors was also an outcome from reflecting on the program.

With a current Indigenous population of around 750, Australia Post should have in place a formalised Indigenous staff development strategy that can be implemented throughout the country. This study has provided a reference document that can be considered by the National Group Manager Human Resources in the development of the Corporation's Indigenous employment strategy. It can also be used as a reference document for state based Human Resource Managers throughout Australia Post.

Further research

Because of the preliminary nature of this study there is scope for more in-depth study into Indigenous staff development by extending the future research beyond junior level Indigenous employees to more senior managerial levels and beyond a GBE environment. As outlined earlier in this paper, there are few studies examining the use of work-based learning for Indigenous employees. It would be useful to follow up the present study with studies that are focused within as well as beyond the GBE environment. These studies could include:

- (a) studies which were not focused on management, such as those pertaining to Indigenous culture and work-based values or cultures
- (b) long term evaluation studies of higher management prospects of the Indigenous participants of the program
- (c) follow up interviews of the Indigenous members of the AR Group to see if they used this experience in other aspects of their own careers.

Although all participants were Indigenous, cultural issues were not specifically addressed within the study beyond limited discussion within the group itself. Interestingly, the consensus of the participants was that culture within the Australia Post workplace was not an issue for them. As the cultural question was not elaborated on, this is a field open to further research.

Conclusion

This study has investigated the implementation of a staff development program for Indigenous staff in a large GBE. The study addressed a gap in current literature relating to the staff development for Indigenous staff using action learning. The outcome of this study should be of significant benefit to the following groups of people: those with responsibility for Indigenous staff development policies and practices within large private and public sector organizations in Australia; and the signatories to the Indigenous Employment Public Statement.

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