Reference No. 99

Summarising: Sanders (2006), *Being a good senior manager in Indigenous community governance: Working with public purpose and private benefit*
Responsibility for the preparation of this research summary rests with the authors of the MCEETYA report *Education, Training and Indigenous Futures: CAEPR Policy Research 1990-2007* and not the original author(s) of the summarised material.

Title of Research:
Being a good senior manager in Indigenous community governance: Working with public purpose and private benefit.

Research Publication:
CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 280/2006

Name of Researcher(s):
W.G. Sanders

Time period:
This paper reflects on issues from the 1970s to the present.

Geographic location:
Remote communities in the Northern Territory; Kintore (Walungurru) in particular.

Methodology:
This paper is based primarily on research conducted by others, or by the author for other purposes than those canvassed in the paper itself. It explores contemporary issues of management by drawing on recent publications, along with research experiences and anecdotes of the author over the past decade.

Aims:
The primary aim of this paper is to reflect on the structural problems of ‘isolated managerialism’ in Indigenous communities.

♦ This paper aims to illuminate the source of the tensions experienced by managers in Indigenous communities and to suggest, through a realistic analysis, some strategies for overcoming these intrinsic problems.

Whilst the paper is mainly concerned with managers of Indigenous community organisations, there are parallels with the managerial experiences of school principals in community schools.

Selected findings and insights:
The paper addresses the conflict between private resources and public benefits that managers have to negotiate. It explores the notion that conflict over resources in communities is to some extent the product of differing perspectives on what is public benefit, i.e. Indigenous understandings of public benefit are often perceived by others (such as state or federal funding bodies) as private exploitation of public resources.

The paper argues that senior managers in Indigenous communities are particularly susceptible to accusations of corruption, but this is not necessarily because they are themselves corrupt. Such people inhabit a structural dilemma. They are involved primarily in delivering state-funded resources to Indigenous people, and they are thereby accountable to groups with differing perspectives on state action and public benefit:

♦ In withholding resources from Indigenous people, on the grounds that such resources are for state-sanctioned public benefit, managers are accused of hoarding, or being greedy.
• On the other hand, by distributing resources according to local community values and perceptions of public benefit, managers are liable to be accused by the state of inappropriate or corrupt practices. Material distribution of resources is always liable to be interpreted as unfair or inappropriate by someone, so managers need to learn to expect such accusations and to strategically balance expectations along with material distribution.

A central role for such managers, in balancing the expectations and perceptions of state and local Indigenous expectations for how resources are used, is therefore to defend the material distribution of resources in the language of public purpose.

Educational implications:
Senior managers need to be realistic about their role and their position: they should not expect support from Indigenous representatives or constituents for rules and practices which hoard resources on the basis of narrow definitions of public benefit or future benefit. School principals and those in leadership positions will need to be sensitive to this political reality when balancing the expectations of funding bodies and local people. [leadership]

The structural complexity of senior management positions in Indigenous communities makes it extremely difficult to satisfy one’s dual obligations. This is even further complicated for local Aboriginal people, who also have differing degrees of obligation within their community based on kinship systems. The obligation to make decisions which might restrict their family’s access to resources in the name of ‘public benefit’ would be politically impossible for a local Indigenous person.

As such, this research suggests that there may be difficulties in local Indigenous people taking roles, such as school principals, teachers or teacher aides even when they have the requisite numeracy, literacy and administrative skills. The politics of being a good manager make such positions inordinately difficult for a local Indigenous person to sustain even when they are otherwise well qualified to do so. [leadership]

Relevance:
Domain 2: School and community educational partnerships
  Cross-cultural relationship between school and community

Domain 3: School Leadership
  Responsiveness to social and cultural context of students

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