



Speech

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Speaker Tony Shepherd AO, President, Business Council of Australia
Venue Reconciliation Australia Government and Business Luncheon, Canberra
Delivery 12.00pm, Friday 23 November 2012

One Country, Many Voices: Update on the Indigenous Engagement Activities of the BCA and Its Members

Introduction

Thank Aunty Agnes for your warm Welcome to Country.

It is a real honour to be on Ngunnawal Country, and I pay my respect to your people, your history and your culture.

Thanks also to Tom, to Dr Ian Watt and the team at Reconciliation Australia for inviting me to come along.

I've been asked to talk about the work members of the Business Council of the Australia are doing to include Indigenous Australians as part of this country's economic growth story.

Also, to give a sense of how Reconciliation Australia helps to facilitate the kind of partnerships that are such a vital ingredient of success.

All of us here are passionate about this work – we all have important, interdependent roles to play.

Corporate Australia recognises its responsibility to help ensure that economic growth should not leave groups of Australians behind.

Every citizen should be in a position to benefit from a strong economy and also to contribute to it.

That notion of shared value is central to all that we do at the BCA.

It's why our members are playing a leading role in developing progressive and effective ways to provide Indigenous people with economic opportunities.

The capacity of highly successful CEOs to think long term and come up with creative approaches means they are well placed to work through complex challenges like this one.

There is a tremendous opportunity, I believe, for us to optimise the way we work together – the public, private and community sectors – that plays to our particular strengths.

Let me start by giving you a sense of the scope of corporate engagement, and how and why companies are involved in this work, beyond what I've already said.

The timing of the lunch today is perfect for this because it coincides with the BCA having completed its annual Indigenous engagement survey of member companies.

2012 Indigenous engagement survey

Now in its fourth year, the survey is designed to achieve four main objectives:

- to raise awareness of what businesses can do to help improve opportunities and outcomes for Indigenous Australians
- to share information about what's working, what hasn't worked so well and the insights of our members on why that's the case
- to encourage more businesses to get involved
- to inform the collaboration between business, government and community organisations, like Reconciliation Australia.

For 2012, we had a record response rate, with 95 member companies (a remarkable 81 per cent of our total membership) filling out the survey.

The responses came not just from mining companies whose engagement with Indigenous communities is well established and well known.

It came from companies operating across the Australian economy, from mining, construction and financial services through to retail and tourism, and professional services companies.

All these companies have found activities that make sense in the context of their overall business strategies.

My colleague, Michael Rose, who heads up the international law firm Allens, for example, has activities within the firm spanning pro bono legal support, employment, supporting and using Indigenous businesses, and cultural awareness training.

Michael chairs the BCA's Indigenous Engagement Task Force, which includes business leaders of the calibre of Richard Goyder from Wesfarmers, Steve McCann from Lend Lease and Ross Love from Boston Consulting, among others.

Top-line findings from this year's survey were:

- an impressive 76 per cent of respondents had formal Indigenous engagement strategies in place
- over the past 12 months, BCA companies have employed an additional 2,000 Indigenous Australians and taken on 700 Indigenous trainees
- as well providing employment opportunities, companies have provided more than 48,500 hours of unpaid work in Indigenous engagement activities
- 43 companies are also supporting Indigenous business and 26 provide pro bono support to help develop Indigenous business capability
- 40 companies are encouraging their business partners to develop Indigenous initiatives.

The vast majority of our members now say that providing jobs, training and other engagement activity also delivers clear commercial benefits to the business.

Many say that cultural awareness delivers broad, often unintended benefits by giving staff greater awareness and respect for diversity.

Another plus is the opportunity to work in partnership with government and the community sector in Indigenous engagement activities.

Reconciliation Australia is central in this.

The only relationship our members rate as being more significant than their relationship with Reconciliation Australia is the partnership many of them forge with specific Indigenous organisations.

Thirty-two companies who responded to the survey this year had turned to Reconciliation Australia for support and guidance, 29 have developed Reconciliation Action Plans (RAPs), including my company Transfield Services.

The significance of the RAP program over the four years the BCA has been undertaking the survey is unmistakable.

It would be fair to say that a whole lot of this important work, and a whole lot of the lessons the country is learning, would not have happened without Reconciliation Australia and the RAP program.

A new kind of partnership

With this fourth survey under our belts, we feel at the BCA as though we are actually on the cusp now of a new era of success in supporting Indigenous economic development.

Which brings me back to the importance of partnerships.

Alongside our survey this year, the BCA has been involved in a collaborative project with the government to explore what our members are doing in more detail.

One of the main aims of the project is to help business and government work together more effectively to maximise the chances of success, particularly in the area of Indigenous employment.

With the first phase of what we all hope to be an ongoing dialogue completed, the essence of what we've found is this:

- we have a shared long-term aim
- business and government each bring unique perspectives and capabilities to this task
- there is a fair degree of mistrust between the two sectors – to put it bluntly, some in government resent providing what they see as 'corporate welfare' to support companies in doing this work
- from our end, business often resents what we see as the rigidity of government requirements.

The bottom line from this groundbreaking project is that there is ample scope to develop a different kind of partnership. Business is keen to work in partnership and support solutions based on the needs of specific communities and regions.

These partnership approaches will look different in different regions and communities, because communities' needs and the needs of business vary dramatically from place to place. But the fundamentals should be similar – government, community and business coming together to develop innovative solutions to create pathways to employment. Where this is working well, the social impact is significant.

However, we have to be clear about what the strength of business is, and play to that strength, which is employment.

With this in mind, the BCA and two government departments involved in the project – FaHCSIA and DEEWR – will convene a roundtable to explore alternative partnership approaches.

A report outlining some of the lessons from business experience – including practical case studies – in this area can be found on the BCA website.

A few weeks ago at one of our BCA member meetings, Michael Rose invited a friend of mine to speak – Ian Trust from the Wunan Foundation.

Ian described what's happening to communities in a way that resonated very deeply with me in terms of how we all need to work together on this.

He drew a picture of a river and described how the kids these days aren't satisfied just staying on their family's side of the river and getting on with life.

They want to cross the river. But the trouble is the river is full of crocs – things like drugs and grog and crime and they don't make it safely to the other side.

It struck me and Michael and our other colleagues that we are the people there on the other side who help people make their new lives.

We can reach out, we can go out onto the jetty but it's not our function or our role to bring the kids across.

That's something that families and government must do, with organisations like Reconciliation Australia helping to guide the rafts our way. Making sure there's always a line of sight between us.

Conclusion

Many of the senior government people here today are aware that as part of the BCA's 30th anniversary next year, we are developing a long term economic vision for Australia.

Its overarching goal is 'enduring prosperity for all Australians'.

So to finish where I started – if the strong economy that the BCA advocates does not serve to improve the circumstances of Australia's most disadvantaged citizens, it diminished all of us.

Our members feel this very keenly.

We know that this is a long game and we know we can only do it working in partnership.

Thank you.

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The Business Council of Australia (BCA) brings together the chief executives of 100 of Australia's leading companies. For almost 30 years, the BCA has provided a unique forum for some of Australia's most experienced corporate leaders to contribute to public policy reform that affects business and the community as a whole.

Our vision is for Australia to be the best place in the world in which to live, learn, work and do business.