

# HEALTHY COMMUNITIES THROUGH CONSULTATION: AN AUSTRALIAN EXPERIENCE

E.E. BROWNFIELD MSc  
PRIVATE CONSULTANT  
EDMONTON, ALBERTA. CANADA

## Editorial Note

Australian Aborigines and Canadian First Nations people have experienced similar kinds of governmental paternalism. While similar, they are not identical, and much can be learned from the differences. In Canada, a form of band chief and council was imposed on all First Nations people living on reserves. In Australia, this process was accompanied, in some cases, by methods which allowed the Aboriginal people to make the process their own. This is the story of a group of Aborigines on Bathurst Island, off the north coast of Australia. With the help of a consultant, then working at IBM, and the encouragement of the white people who governed them, they were able to become truly self-governing.

The importance of this story is in the lessons it teaches. These lessons are for all people who would work in communities with a different culture. This story is about learning to govern. It could also be about coming into communities to do research. The lessons are the same.

## BACKGROUND

During the 1970s, the Australian Government offered to Aboriginal tribes/bands the opportunity to attain a kind of municipal status. This would enable them to set up town councils and to take more responsibility for the development of their communities. Some tribal communities in the Northern Territory assumed the responsibility for policy and planning activities, supported by their community advisor.

One such community was the Tiwi, living on Bathurst Island off the northern coast of Australia. The Tiwi are one of three major Aboriginal tribes which survived to modern times with a definite identity. Living on Bathurst and Melville Islands had isolated them from the Australian mainland. In 1911, a Catholic Mission was established on Bathurst Island. The Mission took on the responsibility of “governing” the Tiwi.

In 1975, the Tiwi community approached the superintendent of the Mission to request assistance in learning to govern themselves according to the Australian model. The superintendent approached an Aboriginal social worker and activist, Margaret Valadian, who then approached IBM for help in training the Tiwi to operate a Town Council effectively.

The Nguiu Council had been started in the 1960s with the power to make and enforce policies concerning their people and the physical development of their environment. In practice, however, they exercised only a limited control of water, sewage, and power systems, leaving health, education, and agriculture to the Catholic Mission. As Ms. Valadian commented in an interview for the IBM Quarterly (Valadian 1975)<sup>1</sup>:

Government policy of self-determination for Aborigines prematurely removed the strong administrative structures which formerly operated in tribal communities, without providing the appropriate information and support systems which would have enabled tribal councils to know the extent and parameters of their authority. More importantly, the Government failed to provide the necessary training and encouragement for these Councils to accept and actively exercise these responsibilities.

Yet given the pressure and pace of development which is now taking place on Bathurst Island — 50 homes scheduled for completion this year; new school and hospital facilities currently under construction; a rapidly developing bi-lingual education programme

---

1. All quoted passages unless otherwise noted are from IBM Internal Report “Bathurst Island Mission Councillor Training 1975.”

— it is essential that the Council becomes much more involved in planning the development of the Nguuu community. But this will not happen as long as the Council is effectively excluded — voluntarily or involuntarily — from the decision-making process through lack of perception, confidence and planning skills.

In all three areas, decisions could be made now which could be quite detrimental to the future development of the community, but as the Council is not sufficiently geared to assume responsibility for planning in these areas, it is unable to reflect or protect community interests.

## THE FIRST VISIT

IBM agreed to offer support for what was assumed by all to be a training course for council covering basic government and administration topics, including

1. election procedures
2. responsibilities of elected officials to electors
3. meeting procedure
4. financial accounting
5. financial planning
6. general administration

To provide “ownership” of the teachings, the course members would develop their own simple textbooks on policy guidance and procedures.

As Management Development Manager at IBM, I had a fairly wide cross-cultural exposure and interest. I was also starting to use organization development practices (cf. Dunphy 1972, Duke 1973) and I was interested in small group learning. Presented with a list of fairly typical objectives, I asked permission to make a preliminary visit to Bathurst Island. I wanted to learn what skills the people already had. I was accompanied by Ms. Valadian and supported by the Mission Superintendent.

I spent a half day with each separate (clan) group of Councillors. I did not go to them, but found a central location and waited there for people to approach me. Once a sufficient number of people had gathered, the first question asked was always, ““What are you here to tell us?”” My reply was always, “Nothing.” Initially baffled, and a little suspicious, they said, “Everyone else comes to tell us things.” Eventually, I was able to discover the principal activities, responsibilities, and total support picture of each clan.

These conversations, with the whole community and Mission staff, made it clear that the major issue before the Councillors and the community was a need for total community involvement and commitment, especially on “self help” activities. I decided to devote the Council training exclusively to “aspects of influencing and encouraging co-operative effort.”

### LESSON ONE

In nearly 100 years, no one had sat down with Indigenous groups and asked 3 questions:

1. How are things now?
2. How should they be?
3. What would you like to do first to move from what is now to what should be?

Because the questions had never been asked, solutions were always imposed from the outside and the statements made by the Tiwi reflected that experience. *No one entering a new community or group should make assumptions before the three questions above have been asked and answered.* In this case, the process took over three days.

### LESSON TWO

The Tiwi had four major clan groupings. The only way to be fully accepted by them was to be “adopted” into one of the clans. There were many white people in the community who, while good, well-meaning people, had never been accepted. For the Tiwi, whose rules of conduct are largely based on relationships, there was no way to interact with these people. *Take the time, when entering a community, to establish appropriate relationships with the people.*

### LESSON THREE

During my initial visit, I was greatly assisted by the Mission Superintendent. He introduced me to the Council and then left me to proceed in my own way. This demonstration of his trust allowed the rest of the Mission staff to be cooperative. I was equally assisted by Ms. Valadian, whose trust in me allowed the Tiwi to trust me also. *It is essential, during the early periods of intercultural contact, to have a mentor, no matter how well we might think we can handle the situation.*

## THE FACILITATION

The Town Council was set up with four representatives from each of the four Tiwi clans. It was clear that while the Council members identified with their clan relationships, they had not learned to identify themselves as an inter-clan group. This gave me three objectives to work for.

1. Bring the Councillors together as an “exclusive group.”
2. Give them an insight into arranging and influencing co-operative effort.
3. Have them understand that the “power” of a group exceeds the sum of the individuals.



*The church. The area underneath was contained between the above ground supporting piles and walled with open palings. This made the learning space dark but still allowed for the use of video. Photo by Henry Strasburger.*

My principal concerns as I prepared for this course were:

1. satisfactory accommodation
2. maintenance of a cohesive group throughout the course
3. avoidance of interference with the group, by the community, during the event.

The ideal accommodation would have been the school, which was in use during the day. There was, however, space under the church which was removed from the central village area and the main roads. This provided the relative isolation needed to allow the group to learn with minimal interference from the rest of the community,

In my preliminary visit, a number of issues had been raised by the four clans. In preparation for the course, I had asked them to consider solutions for the five most urgent and universally held concerns. These were:

1. Job Opportunities
2. Housing
3. Facilities (Sporting) for young people, including swimming pool
4. Home Management
5. Café

In the evenings, with the permission of the councillors, I made the day's video available to any community members who wished to view it. This allowed a fuller community involvement without disrupting the actual training sessions. It also had the effect of demonstrating clearly that the Council members picked up skills quickly and were soon using them effectively. After each viewing, the video was destroyed.

Each Council member was given a "passport letter." This was a document which served as an introduction and explained the purpose of their exercise. They were to approach white and Aboriginal community members to gather information around the issues they had identified. Anyone who was resistant was given a copy of the letter. Empowered by this exercise to gather information independently of the Mission staff, a precedent was set allowing future exercises to take place on their own initiative.

## LESSON FOUR

*In developing capacity in a community, leave your skills behind. This enables at least individuals, if not the community as a whole, to carry on once you are gone.* All too often, Aboriginal communities are conditioned to assume the

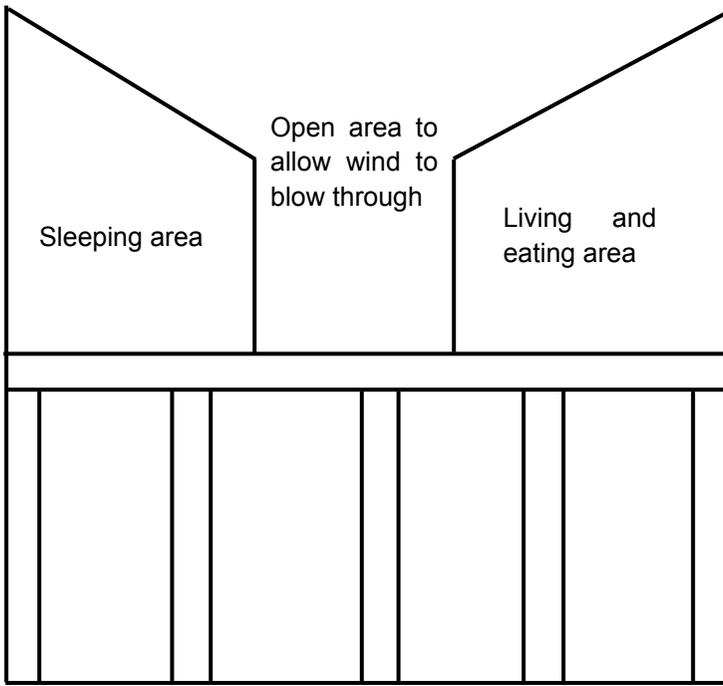
need for an outside “expert” to solve their problems. The requirements of regulatory agencies such as universities, governments, and professional associations are easily confused with solutions to community problems.

## TRAINING RESULTS

There were four immediate results of the training event.

1. The community as a whole gained a greater awareness of the Council and Councillors. “I learned that in any plan for the Island, first council takes plan to people, and talks to them; then council gets agreement from the people, then council decides where to put the project.”
2. The white members of the community gained a greater appreciation of the abilities and potential abilities of the Tiwi in general and the Council members in particular. The head of the Primary School commented that she had always felt the councillors could do it, but now they had clear evidence for themselves.
3. The working relationships between the Council members were improved. “. . . we learned how to work together so work will flow easily and we can be better as a council.”
4. The Council members gained a greater recognition of their power *as a group* to effect change. “I learned that Council does work, Council does help one another, Council must tell people what we do this for.”
5. There was a recognition by Council members of the information and communication problems between themselves and the community and themselves and all other outside parties. “When we [councillors] talk to people they don’t all understand . . .so I have learned that we must communicate better with the people.”

After the last training session, it was decided to send two councillors, two community members, and one Mission staff to Adelaide. To this point, all housing in Nguuu was built on concrete slabs, with three walls and a galvanized tin roof. The materials had to be shipped overland and assembled by outside contractors. Furthermore, these were houses ill-suited to the climate of Nguuu and the living patterns of the Tiwi. The councillors realized that they could solve the housing and employment problems by having an Adelaide firm design pre-built housing for them. This could be shipped at considerably less cost and assembled by the Tiwi themselves. The houses were to be roughly 35 feet by 30 feet. The Catholic Church provided seed money for the project.



Pilings providing open area for wind to blow under house

*Elevation plan of Tiwi pre-built housing*

## LESSON FIVE

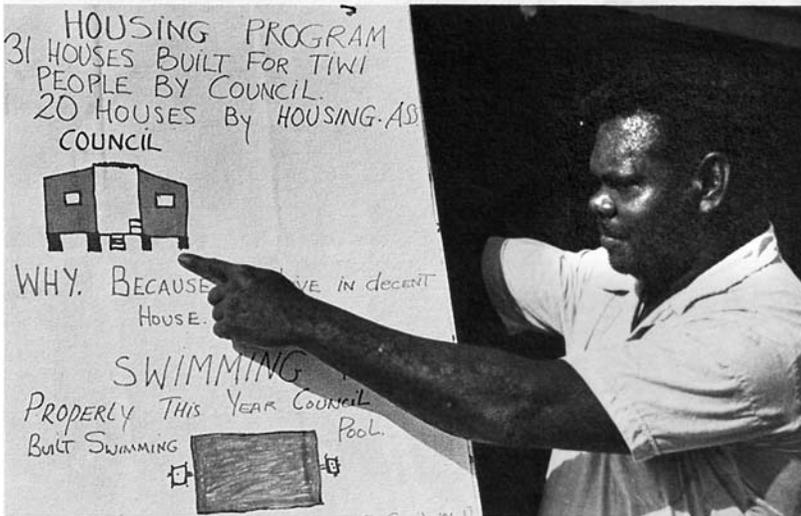
*The process of building capacity in a community creates indirect consequences of actions over a long-term. If you do a good job of leaving your skills behind you, you will get little or no credit for later results. This is success. A community has truly been given access to capacity it already had when their response to change is "We did it."*

## THE EVALUATION

One year after the training course, I returned to Bathurst Island to see if the Council was still operating more effectively. The presence of 35 new homes, built by the Tiwi using the pre-built materials from Adelaide, was confirmation that the Council had benefited from the training.

The Tiwi were able to show the following achievements.

1. There was much more purposeful activity within the Council.
2. The Council members were aware of the power and influence of the Council.



*A member of the Nguuu Town Council explains progress on the housing project. Photo by Henry Strasburger.*

3. There was considerable personal development in 6 (out of 16) members and some personal development in most of the others.
4. The Council meeting procedure, preparations, and participation by members were all greatly improved.
5. The European staff saw significant improvement in their attitudes and responsibilities to Council.
6. There had been progress in most of the agreed “key issue” projects discussed during the course.

A number of additional and more intangible activities had occurred within the Community which may have been contributed to by our total activity. However, it can confidently be reported that “we were able to make a successful planned intervention into the Bathurst Island Community via the Council members and that overall the long term effects will be beneficial!”

## SUMMARY

For me, the most important learning was the interwoven qualities of development activities whether community or organizational. This article is aimed at forging a link between organization development concepts in and with a community setting.

## REFERENCES

Duke, Chris, ed.

1973 *Small group Learning in Australia: Collected Papers*. Canberra, Australia: Centre for Continuing Education.

Dunphy, Dexter

1972 *The Primary Group: A Handbook for Analysis and Field Research*. New York: Meredith Corporation.

Valadian, Margaret

1975 "Interview: Margaret Valadian." *IBM Quarterly* 2(4): 4-5.