



INTERVIEW WITH ALASTAIR KING, CEO

## Arnhem Land Progress AC

The Arnhem Land Progress Aboriginal Corporation (ALPA), established in 1972, is an Aboriginal-owned organisation providing benefits to its members from its successful commercial operations. It is not reliant on government funding. From an initial five stores, ALPA now has a network of 13 company owned stores and 12 managed stores, servicing over 18,000 Indigenous people across the NT, Far North Queensland and the Torres Strait (trading in Qld as Island & Cape). ALPA also operates mechanical repair shops, accommodation centres, clubs, homeland services, information technology and training businesses as well as delivering the Federal Government's Remote Jobs and Communities Program (RJCP) in Milingimbi and Ramingining. ALPA is one of the largest financially independent Indigenous employers in Australia, with over 600 Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander staff, and more than \$9 million spent on unsubsidised Indigenous wages last year.

### What would you say are ALPA's key governance and management strengths?

- A mix of representation; equal amounts of traditional owners and community leadership;
- Directors take off their family and community hats and put on their ALPA hat;
- In the distribution of resources, the needs of a community come before that of families and individuals;
- An ability to link mainstream governance practices to traditional practices. For example, safe work practices are observed in ceremony just like in the company. Someone is responsible if things go wrong;
- Ongoing directors' professional development, both as a group and individually;
- Senior management have all come through the business; so there is that understanding of where we are, what we do and who we are working for;
- Commitment to the commercial principles – as a business first and a benevolent organisation second; this is how we self-fund our benevolent programs;
- Dispute management – ALPA employs a Yolngu liaison officer who works with the senior leadership of the community if there is a dispute;
- An annual strategic planning day.



ABOVE: ALPA CEO Alastair King [seated] and Acting Chairperson - Micky Wunungmurra

### How many Aboriginal people do you employ and what sorts of jobs are they employed in?

ALPA employs 600 Indigenous workers across the business in retail, office work, in the selling area, filling shelves, putting customers through, in the storeroom, and food preparation in takeaway; they work from general store worker level through to supervisor. We also have non retail employees.

Some of the workers have been there for 20 or 30 years. Sometimes staff elevated to assistant manager or duty manager come under so much family pressure that they end up resigning. But we are not giving up (on Indigenous career paths)!

*"Directors take off their family and community hats and put on their ALPA hat."*

Alastair King, CEO, ALPA

### **What are the key governance and management strengths or practices that have allowed ALPA to maintain and build on its Aboriginal workforce?**

Directors make a point of calling in and talking to managers and staff on a regular basis and attend staff weekly team meetings. It breaks down that barrier of us and them and makes for a flatter structure that people can talk across.

Maintaining daily rosters empowers the team leaders to get on and do their work and not have to go to the balanda managers for direction all the time. Taking charge of their own groups gives them ownership and authority over it. That provides for a healthy work environment.

All management staff undertake cross cultural training as part of their induction. We also have a full time staff cultural mentor for when things arise between community, staff and managers.

*“Aboriginal boards need to be less trusting of management. People say, ‘this CEO just tells us to trust him; he’ll do the right thing’. Don’t trust him. Don’t be his friend; get out there and test him, pressure him, and ask all the questions.”*

Alastair King, CEO, ALPA

### **Does ALPA have a plan for developing young Aboriginal leadership?**

Several years ago ALPA implemented an Associate Directors program on the board. Applicants apply by filling in an application form to show they can read and write and must undergo a police check before being accepted. Associate Directors are engaged two at a time for two years. Applicants are interviewed on what they think the board does and what they think they can contribute. Through the interview process, the organisation looks for young leaders who display confidence to ensure they are up to the task. After the two years, a further two are engaged from a different community so there is a continual rotation. They get paid to attend all board meetings and are afforded the same respect and ability to contribute to a discussion as directors. They cannot vote. A board mentor is engaged to look after the Associate Directors and explain the processes.

### **What have been the significant structural changes in ALPA’s governance or management over the last few years?**

Starting up an RJCP was a big structural change. It was management talking to the board saying, ‘we can’t get these job service agencies to help us with getting staff.’ CDEP wasn’t working. And so when this change (RJCP) happened, the board basically said to us, ‘we’ve got to start thinking we’re not essentially a retail organisation. That’s our business. But we’re a Yolngu organisation. And if we don’t like what’s going on in this space, we either put up or shut up.’ So we signed the RJCP contract and held our breath – but we haven’t looked back.

### **What does ALPA see as the key governance or management challenges going forward for Aboriginal organisations?**

Aboriginal boards need to be less trusting of management. I’ve heard people say, you know, ‘this CEO just tells us to trust him; he’ll do the right thing.’ Don’t trust him. Don’t be his friend; get out there and test him, pressure him, and ask all the questions. Because if you look at so many of the Yolngu organisations that have gone, it’s not the directors most times that have sent them broke, it’s been the non-Indigenous management that’s sent them broke.

ALPA is passionate about governance training but we see a real gap at the medium level and no standards around much of the training delivered to Indigenous directors. Training consultants just do it the way they like to do it. There are plenty of people delivering basic training but some of the ALPA board have been directors for a long time and to put them through a basic course would be insulting. At the advanced level there is the Australian Institute of Company Directors training which is very intense, involves lots of reading and would be quite difficult for most ALPA directors to get across. ALPA is developing its own delivery model and material but we haven’t quite got there yet.

### **Do you have a final comment?**

Our philosophy with people coming to work with us is, ‘if you don’t want to work with Yolngu, you don’t want to train them, you don’t want to develop them in to higher jobs, you don’t belong here’.

**Interviewer: Wes Miller, Aboriginal Governance and Management Program (AGMP)**

**For more information on ALPA, go to [www.alpa.asn.au](http://www.alpa.asn.au)**