



INTERVIEW WITH SUSIE LOW, FORMER CEO

WARLPIRI YOUTH DEVELOPMENT AC

The Aboriginal Governance and Management Program's CEO Forum, In The Hot Seat, highlighted the importance of the chief executive in the success of NT Aboriginal organisations. Susie Low sat in the CEO hot seat of the very successful Warlpiri Youth Development Aboriginal Corporation or WYDAC for 11 years, until December 2015. WYDAC began as the Mt Theo Centre, largely responsible for arresting the scourge of petrol sniffing at Yuendumu. During Susie's time, WYDAC expanded its youth services to the three other main Warlpiri (or Yapa) communities of Lajamanu, Willowra and Nyirripi; and it built and ran the Yuendumu pool with strong social outcomes. These are just some of WYDAC's recently independently evaluated achievements. In something of an exit interview, we asked Susie to reflect on her time at WYDAC.

What are main factors behind your long time as WYDAC CEO?

The key factor was the support of the board, and very good communication between the management team and the board. But also the committed team of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff who were working towards a vision. That was very motivating for me to lead that team. Being able to see positive outcomes and positive community feedback was also extremely encouraging. And as the level of trust grew the outcomes improved. That was something that really helped to keep me going.

How important are those outcomes for Warlpiri communities?

Recently we had an external evaluation conducted. That did very much confirm the value the communities place on WYDAC activities; and the WYDAC culture of using Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people working together and combining their skills, their knowledge and culture for the benefit of young people. There's a strong sense of ownership, because Warlpiri run the programs, they decide on program priorities and direction. It's become embedded in the life of all of the communities. And more than 50 per cent of staff are Yapa.



ABOVE: Former WYDAC CEO Susie Low celebrating Christmas with director Jangala Rice

There's no doubt that constructing the Yuendumu pool and the ongoing management of that despite extraordinary barriers to funding is something that we are very proud of – being able to watch the outcomes from that. The evidence of the benefits of the pool across all ages has been remarkable.

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Susie Low, former CEO, WYDAC

What do you think are WYDAC's significant governance strengths?

The fact that it was created by Warlpiri for Warlpiri to address community needs. There was no-one coming and telling them what they needed to do and directing that. It was very much from the ground up. That has led to a very strong acknowledgement of the authority of the board, which is taken very, very seriously.

Directors take great pride in being part of the board because they can then be proud of the outcomes but also the reputation of WYDAC, which is very strong.

One of the key elements is commitment to board meetings. I've never in 11 years had to cancel or postpone a meeting due to a lack of quorum.

In meetings we had very clear discussions on the money story. People understand the money story much more than they did 11 years ago. And decisions were debated, discussed and often we might shift focus. But I think the key factor in strong governance is a good relationship between the board and the management team, with open and honest communication so that we always feel like we are on the same track.

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Susie Low, former CEO, WYDAC

What are the key challenges for WYDAC and other NT Aboriginal organisations going forward?

I think the key challenge is the fact that government priorities often don't reflect community priorities. Government priorities are what dictates funding of course. There is a serious challenge (for boards) to be heard and acknowledged as a community of experts who actually know what they need. Unfortunately, success or even a good reputation, good outcomes, may not necessarily equate to sufficient funding. We've seen that in the last funding round, some very successful organisations with fantastic outcomes not being funded to continue their work.

Do you have any advice for CEOs relatively new to NT Aboriginal organisations?

Well, I can share what works for me: learning to listen, to really listen and to learn, acknowledging that you are dealing with the experts, you are the new kid on the block and they are highly skilled in culture and context and the issues of their community.

Of course it's a very busy role; there's so much to do in terms of compliance and fulfilling government needs. But I learnt, because I was forced to learn, to just stop and have a cup of tea, just stop and listen to the stories about country and about family, go for a drive with elders, just learn. Take that time. I always left my door open for community members. Sometimes that was actually quite hard.



ABOVE: Former WYDAC CEO Susie Low and directors Geraldine Naparurrla Dixon and Jimmy Japanangka Langdon

But it was often those times that people would wander in and sit down and five minutes later I would find out something really significant about their family, their community that they wanted to share with me that perhaps I could work with them on.

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Do you have any plans to return to NT Aboriginal affairs work?

Absolutely. I feel like I've been particularly privileged to have had very patient and wise Warlpiri teachers and with that comes a responsibility, I think, to continue to use what I've been taught. So after I've had a nice little rest at the beach I will look for short term project work with Aboriginal organisations in the NT and share what I've learnt.

Interviewer: David Jagger, Aboriginal Governance and Management Program.

For more Information on WYDAC, go to www.mttheo.org