

## **Focal Extended Inc**

### **Collaboration yields accredited training for the disability sector**

#### **Summary**

In 2005 Focal Extended Inc (Focal) secured government funding to provide Certificate III Disability Work training to several agencies in the Ipswich region. Pre-existing collaborative relationships within the local disability sector prompted Focal to adopt a collaborative approach to training delivery. The result was satisfying for all parties, including staff who were previously hesitant about formal training.

#### **Partners**

- Focal Extended Inc
- Fassifern Community Centre
- Gitana Consulting and Training Services
- The Queensland Department of Employment and Training

#### **Background**

Focal is a small operation that provides support to people with a disability, their families and carers in the Ipswich Region. Focal provides direct personal care, community access and a range of programmes and activities to suit individuals who access the service.

It is actively involved in many networks and inter-agency projects and supports unfunded community group activities. One important network is the Ipswich disability non-government organisations (NGO) managers' forum which has met monthly for the past four years to ensure good inter-agency communication, support and relationships. It has a core membership of eight agencies and welcomes visiting speakers.

#### **Drivers for collaboration**

- The prohibitive costs of purchasing training or sending staff to training
- An organisational vision and mission that acknowledges people with a disability are part of a wider community of families, service providers and other stakeholders.

#### **The collaboration story**

In 2005 Focal's attention was drawn to the Department of Employment and Training's Training in Communities funding round. This funding could provide accredited training at no cost to Focal or its staff. Focal chose to apply and initially did not intend to adopt a multi-agency approach.

However, as a result of collaborative thinking and positive pre-existing regional relationships, Focal took a non-competitive stance and at the next NGO managers' forum invited other agencies to be a part of the application. The Fassifern Community Centre at Boonah took up the offer and its participation in the application required the provision of local material and support letters.

The funding application was successful and in June 2005 Focal was advised that 15 places in Ipswich and 12 places in Boonah were available for accredited training in Certificate III Disability Work, in partnership with a nominated Registered Training Organisation (RTO).

The Department of Employment and Training funding stipulated that 27 people would complete the training. The two agencies and the training organisation agreed that

initially oversubscribing courses would overcome the possibility of participants' attrition.

Focal and Fassifern Community Centre filled as many places as needed and, with DET approval, offered remaining places to other agencies in the region. For the sake of equity, two places were initially offered to each agency. Four agencies took up the offer.

This project is complete resulting in the following:

- It provided eight accredited units from Certificate IV Disability Work to 30 participants from six agencies across the region. (Rather than the initially proposed Certificate III level.)
- It significantly broadened staff networks and perspectives on service delivery across agencies.
- It strengthened connections and ideas for future collaboration between agencies.

### **Tools and strategies for collaboration**

Collaborative commitments are noted in Focal's mission and value statements. In particular, one mission statement is:

Focal Extended Inc. exists to support people with a disability and their families and carers within the general community. It achieves this by:

- Establishing strong cooperative and collaborative partnerships with other service providers and community stakeholders

Two of Focal's formal value statements also underpin collaboration:

- To be flexible, collaborative and innovative in responding to the support needs of people with a disability, their families and carers.
- To acknowledge that people with a disability live within a broader family and social community and to be respectful and supportive of them within that context.

Although the training project partners already had good working relationships, a Memorandum of Understanding (see Attachment 1) formalised the commitments and undertakings of each partner agency. This ensured boundaries were clear and positive relationships maintained. Having an agreement at this organisational level meant commitment to the project was not dependent on maintaining relationships at the operational level.

A partnership agreement clarified expectations and commitments with the contracted training organisation.

Financial management for the project was straightforward as it involved one grant contract between the Department of Employment and Training and Focal. Focal was responsible for accounting for the funds and acquitting the grant. The partnership agreement established the pricing and process for the RTO to invoice Focal for training milestones achieved. The grant included funds for resources, venue hire, and so on. Fassifern Community Centre and other agencies participating in the training invoiced for approved expenses which were negotiated at the outset.

### **Outcomes**

- Accredited training in Certificate IV Disability Work for 30 participants from six agencies.
- Positive, lasting relationships between training organisation staff and participants.

- A best-practice example of a government – NGO partnership for social outcomes. Local Department of Employment and Training staff were supportive, flexible, available and interested in the project and its outcomes.
- Better sector relationships and trust developed —a stepping stone for more ambitious collective projects.

### **Success factors**

- A history of positive collaboration, trust and supportive action undertaken through the NGO managers' forum. For example, members provide support letters for agency funding applications, attend other members' events and showcases, and present a unified voice to funding bodies on issues affecting the sector.
- A Focal approach that values sector collaboration.
- Focal's decision not to adopt a competitive mentality about the funding opportunity.
- The Department of Employment and Training's willingness to be flexible about broadening the outcomes for the sector.
- Strong working relationships with all parties involved in the project.
- Clarity and agreement on expectations from the outset.
- Partnership with funding bodies acknowledging all parties are seeking valid outcomes and support each another.
- High-quality training provision. Gitana Consulting and Training Services was committed to sector improvement, genuine engagement with trainees and supporting those hesitant to undertake formal training.
- Gitana Consulting and Training Services' responsiveness. They provided the maximum accredited units possible by reworking the budget to provide eight units instead of five at Certificate IV level (and an improvement on the initially proposed Certificate III level).

### **Challenges**

- The project was developed with the intention to partner with a national RTO. The relationship between Focal and the RTO was positive during the application process but the RTO had capacity problems during the commencement phase that meant the training program could not progress as Focal required.
- Ending the tacit agreement to partner with the initial RTO and finding a new RTO was difficult and, at times, challenging. The funding body's neutrality and its support of Fassifern Community Centre and Focal management proved invaluable.
- The experience proved that, although negotiations were uncomfortable, it was better to secure a different contractor than to continue with one unable to meet expectations.
- A second issue arising from this evolving collaboration was an increase in reporting requirements that was not built into project. The benefits of the relationships formed and strengthened outweighed this administrative detail.

### **The future**

As a result of the training participants' improved connections and broader perspectives about sector collaboration, a collaborative 'Building Links' project called Complex Cases — Collaborative Action commenced on 1 October 2006 which will focus on multi-agency case management.

### **For more information**

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## **Attachment 1**

### **Memorandum of Understanding**

The Training in Communities Programme is a joint program between Focal Extended Inc, Fassifern Community Centre and Gitana Consulting and Training Services which sets out to provide accredited training to:

- 15 employees from the Ipswich area, and
- 12 volunteers from the Boonah area.

The project involves provision of local accredited training for local people with a focus on:

- enhancing skills in the disability sector, and
- improving employment opportunities.

To achieve these important objectives, there needs to be a strong, positive collaboration between Focal Extended Inc, Fassifern Community Centre and Gitana Consulting and Training Services. As the recipient of Department of Employment and Training funding, a signed partnership between Focal Extended Inc and Gitana Consulting and Training Services already exists. However, it is important that there is also a clear understanding between Focal Extended Inc and Fassifern Community Centre.

To achieve this, this Memorandum of Understanding is agreed between Focal Extended Inc and Fassifern Community Centre and sets out how the project will operate.

This Letter of Agreement is between:

Focal Extended Inc            and            Fassifern Community Centre

Focal Extended Inc agrees to provide:

- a project administrator who coordinates the contractual and financial requirements with the Department of Employment and Training and liaises with Gitana Consulting and Training Services
- 15 Ipswich-based trainees
- an assigned training program coordinator
- supervision and support for Ipswich trainees
- training accommodation and facilities for Ipswich trainees as required
- an evaluation of the Ipswich-based training and program
- insurance cover for Ipswich activities
- media management for the project, and
- clear timelines and communication with regard to project reporting deadlines and requirements.

Fassifern Community Centre agrees to provide:

- an assigned training program coordinator to coordinate local participants and participate on the project management team
- 12 Boonah-based trainees
- office facilities for a local training coordinator
- training accommodation and facilities for Boonah trainees as required

- timely statistical information on trainees, their attendance and outcomes as required by Focal Extended Inc for Department of Employment and Training reporting
- an evaluation of the Boonah-based training and program
- insurance cover for Boonah activities, and
- media management for the project.

### **Project Management**

The project administrator is Focal Extended Inc. employee, while the Boonah training program coordinator is employed by Fassifern Community Centre Inc.

S/he will also cooperate fully with the project management team and abide by any agreed regulations and safety control measures.

A team approach will be encouraged at all times to ensure positive training outcomes are achieved. The project management team will consist of at least one Focal representative, one Fassifern representative and one Gitana Consulting and Training Services representative.

The management team will communicate regularly, particularly if any changes are to be implemented. Gitana Consulting and Training Services will be responsible for ensuring quality support and training is provided to participants.

### **Dispute resolution**

Disputes will be addressed by the project management team, with the facilitation of the Department of Employment and Training project officer, if necessary.

### **Media protocols**

Media coverage may be arranged by either party. Media releases must be circulated for approval to all project management team members.

Each party's support for the program must be acknowledged in all publications pertaining to the program and at any event associated with the program. It is a funding condition that Department of Employment and Training approval must be obtained prior to any media release distribution.

Signed and dated by both parties.