

Community mentoring alliance project in the Mackay Hinterland

Disparate communities trial mentoring model to strengthen governance

Summary

The Mackay Regional Council for Social Development (MRCSD) is developing a mentoring model to respond to community management committee needs in the hinterland mining towns of Moranbah, Dysart and Nebo.

The model will support committees under pressure because of regional characteristics and governance challenges in non-government organisations.

A working group of community and business sector representatives and an MRCSD worker lead the project.

Partners

The people who comprise the Community Mentoring Working Group hold numerous roles in their community, including:

- Belyando Shire community development officer
- Belyando Shire Councillor
- Belyando Shire community services manager
- Dysart volunteer management committee member from a sporting organisation
- Moranbah volunteer management committee member from community services organisation
- Nebo Community Development Group representative
- Nebo Shire Councillor
- BHP Billiton Mitsubishi Alliance representative
- Private consultancy business owner
- Small business owner
- Broadsound Shire Councillor
- Dysart coordinator of a service for aged and people with disabilities, and
- MRCSD representative.

Background

The towns involved in the project are located between 120 and 300 kilometres west of Mackay in north Queensland. They are service centres for coal mines as well as many cattle and grain properties, with populations of 2100 to 9000 people. Mine workers frequently do shiftwork and don't stay long term, so are often not available for management committee roles. This transience, combined with increased committee accountability requirements, makes committee recruitment difficult. Training availability for committee members and the time commitment involved are problematic.

Drivers for collaboration

The pressures on committees and strategies for action were documented in an unpublished 2003 report *Collaborative Community Management Models Project* prepared by MRCSD and QCOSS.

This profiled eight Dysart and Moranbah organisations and identified a need for skill development, advice and support for committee members. Participants also saw value in enhancing relationships with organisations in the region and the state.

The report noted that, while many committees' needs are similar, a management model needs to accommodate the unique characteristics of organisations and towns.

It also noted that sustainability is important where resources are stretched, so a collaborative approach would help share findings, the tasks of establishing a model and implementation benefits.

The collaboration story

In light of the work done in 2003, MRCSD successfully sought Community Partnerships Program funding from the BHP Billiton Mitsubishi Alliance (BMA), the owner of seven mines in the area. This was a win-win partnership as both parties desire the continuation of community development and welfare services to support the wellbeing of hinterland communities.

The MRCSD project worker and a local community services worker visited relevant parties throughout the region and found there was support for the development of a Community Mentoring Working Group.

The working group drafted its terms of reference to define its purpose and then began researching the best way to develop a model to suit the area's needs. Research involved conversations with organisations and networks across the region, a review of the outcomes of the November 2004 MRCSD regional forum, a literature search, a review of the Local Government Association's Women's Mentoring Program, and two local youth mentoring programs. The project worker also attended a three-day mentoring workshop.

The process highlighted issues mentors would be dealing with, including:

- mine workers' long working hours and four-to-seven day shifts
- lack of social capital or a sense of belonging in the local community
- community members' lack of time and capacity
- friction between full-time workers and volunteer committee members
- NGO staff assuming committee members' roles
- too many committees involving the same group of people
- committee member burn out
- lack of positive feedback for committee members
- lack of knowledge of the wider community about NGOs
- high government expectations
- indemnity risks for individuals, and
- training that is geared to a relevant topic, well facilitated, and based on users' experience/issues
- a regional database of committee members and organisations
- processes that ensure ongoing skills development
- access to a liaison person who can interpret information, legal and governmental requirements, and represent them if necessary, and

- provision of feedback.

The mentoring model to support this (see Attachment A: BMA Community Alliance Mentoring Project — Mentoring Model) has been agreed by the working group and is being trialled from July to December 2006. A draft mentoring manual has been developed for the trial. It clarifies the roles of mentor and mentee and the 'one stop shop' or 'mentoring focal point' of the model. It also provides relevant policies and documentation.

The working group has pooled its knowledge and expertise to determine the best ways to recruit mentors and mentees. To date, four organisations have volunteered as mentees for the trial, and a pool of mentors has been recruited.

Tools and strategies for collaboration

Formal processes have been developed for the trial. The working group wrote terms of reference for their work, and the draft mentoring manual distils the working group's understandings and intent for mentoring relationships.

One of the key strategies has been to base the project in local information and relationships and to give local people ownership and control through the working group. Direct contact has been a successful strategy too, in terms of working group recruitment, receiving feedback about committee issues, and mentee and mentor recruitment.

Outcomes

- A working group has collaborated for two years and is ongoing.
- A mentoring model has been customised for the region.
- A trial of the model is underway, with four organisations participating.
- The working group has developed a mentoring program and flexible implementation options.

Success factors

- Participation by a persistent core group of hinterland organisation and business representatives in steering the work.
- The strong links between highly committed and collaborative people in the hinterland towns, their use of extensive networks, and their action focus.
- Community Partnerships Program funding from the BHP Billiton Mitsubishi Alliance (BMA) to employ a project worker. The project has relied heavily on this worker, as demonstrated when the project has faltered because of personnel changes in this role.
- Aligning the project's goals, then having regular reviews, so a clear project focus is maintained over time.
- Development of an effective mentoring model.
- Maintaining communication processes, including email networks and face-to-face contact wherever possible.
- Difficulty ensuring committee succession and encouraging younger members.

Based on these factors, the working group agreed that the model would incorporate:

- training delivered in the local area
- training that is specific, short, sharp, local and provided when required
- Clarity about what defines 'collaboration', with agreement about the distribution of responsibility, workload and participation processes for the project.
- Acknowledgement of stakeholders' varying resource and skill levels, how this affects their participation, and how they can work collaboratively to develop skills and share resources.

Challenges

Coordinating a project with three towns needs time and capacity. Due to unforeseen circumstances, the timeline has been extended and there have been three changes of project worker. This has meant a two-year lifespan for the project, with deferred results.

A Community Mentoring Working Group review of the project identified the following issues:

- lack of clarity on project aims and goals
- time requirements versus results
- the work required to implement the project
- meetings have become 'talk fests', and
- working group members' lack of time to attend meetings.

In spite of this, the committed core group has persevered.

The future

Following the model's 2006 trial, evaluation will occur in early 2007. This will include feedback from all working party stakeholders on the model's practical application. With this input, the mentoring model will be improved and mentoring processes streamlined. Building Links funding (with the Strengthening Non-Government Organisations initiative) was received in August 2003 to progress and extend the trial into a sustainable process across the wider geographic region. This includes employment of a mentoring coordinator and development of MRCSD's website into a regional portal for access to mentors, referrals or short consultations as well as governance resources and links. A key role for the mentoring coordinator will be to implement strategies to ensure the long-term viability of this mentoring model, as well as its continued relevance, practical usefulness and accessibility to management committee members across the region.

For more information

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The working group's terms of reference, draft mentoring manual and other resources are available on request.

Attachment A: BMA Community Alliance Mentoring Project — Mentoring Model

Appendix A: BMA Community Alliance Mentoring Project mentoring model

