

WPS DEVELOPMENTAL NOTE #11

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Topic: The use of distance

The reason for providing employment well away from north Queensland was explained in my report titled; “A report on the trial of placing young Indigenous people from Cape York Peninsula region into private sector employment in southern states”. Quoting from page 7:

Young people refusing to attend school and work are commonplace on Cape York Peninsula. In most cases, this appears to result from the lack of an educational and work ethic, combined with the unrestricted, unconditional licence endowed upon young people by their families and community at large. One strategy used to deal with the problem of school rejection has been to send young people to school well away from the distracting and sometimes negative influences of peers, family and community. Experience has shown that these school or work placements must be located far enough to deter the young person from running back to family and community as soon as conformity is required and restrictions apply. This strategy has proven to be the most effective in providing formal education for children and young people on Cape York. It is also a key strategy used in this trial. Distance will not only deter young people from leaving, it will also prevent others from interfering (James, 2005, p.7).”

A good example of the effectiveness of this design occurred a few months ago with participant #9, aged 17. This participant had a very low productivity—picking on average 1 bin of oranges per day. In addition, he was highly disruptive to other participants. He was counselled and warned by his employer and Work Placement Scheme (WPS) group supervisor on numerous occasions with no effect. His excuse for his low productivity was his excessive weight—an excuse that I refused to accept. It seemed to me that the real reason he chose to ignore all the warnings was because there was **no need** to pay any attention to them. He never had to wear the consequences of his misbehaviour in the past (his family was always there to bail him out), so why should this situation be any different? Before long his employer gave him the sack, and as expected, he contacted his family asking them to pay for his fair back home. Fortunately for him (perceived as unfortunate by him at that time) his three week assessment period had passed.

It was at this point that I intervened. I was fully aware of participant #9’s situation and I had a good understanding of his general character. His known weaknesses were that he had no savings, no credit, no transport, no food stocks, no knowledge of local support services, no local friend or family member, a big appetite, liked his home comforts, very spoilt and a very long way from home. His known strengths were that he was reasonably resilient and intelligent, he had the capacity to reason things out and he had good communication skills.

One of the first things I did was to contact his family with the request that they do not assist him under any circumstances. When I obtained this agreement, I informed participant #9 that he had 24 hours to vacate his caravan, as stated in the rules; we are not a welfare agencies providing free accommodation.

If readers think about this for a moment, you can see that this young person had set himself up for a real problem. In all probability, the ensuing crisis had the potential power to force him to reassess his behaviour at a depth that no other prior intervention had achieved. Those who understand crisis theory and intervention know what I am talking about. A state of disequilibrium was created—the realisation that their usual ways of dealing with a situation no longer works. This is a time when the person is vulnerable and more open to change.

As it turned out, after 48 hours participant #9 rang me to say that he now realised his mistake (clearly articulated) and asked for the opportunity to show his change in attitude. This opportunity was offered on the agreement that he live and work separate from all other participants with a minimum of 3 orange bins per day. Today participant #9 has a much improved attitude and is held in high regard by his new employer. He picks between 4 and 5 bins of oranges per day. He lives in his own caravan in a small caravan park close to the centre of Renmark and visits the main group only on weekends.



Pictured above is participant #15 picking a minimum of 3 orange bins per day.

As I said, this is a good example of how the design of the WPS can bring about a positive change in behaviour. However, readers should not think that all participants treated in this way respond in the same positive manner. Take for example participant #10, aged 19. He was also a poor performer; picking on average only 1 bin of oranges per day. Like participant #9, counselling and warnings by his employer and WPS group supervisor had no discernable effect. He also had no savings, no credit, no transport, no food stocks, no knowledge of local support services, no local friends or family members and was a very long way from home. His three week assessment period had also passed. But there was a crucial difference between him and participant #9. Participant #10 clearly lacked the same reasoning skills, had poor communication skills and no sense of moral reasoning. When he was told that he had 24 hours to vacate his caravan he went and broke into a caravan belonging to one of the other participants and stole his \$800 hidden under his bed. He then took off back home to Yarrabah.

This sort of break-and-enter and stealing behaviour often occurs in many Cape York communities. Often it's young people standing over defenceless older people demanding that they hand over their welfare cheque to buy grog or dope. If they don't hand it over they can expect to have their home ransacked.

In hindsight, this young person should not have been accepted into the WPS. His general demeanour suggested that he had mental health problems. His movements were lethargic and expressed little emotion. He was often withdrawn and rarely interacted with other members of his group. He was often confused and slow at organising his thoughts, and when not working he spent most of his time sleeping. When I told him to leave the WPS he displayed no emotional – immediate and total acceptance. He asked for no help; not even from his own family.

In conclusion, distance from home can be used as a very powerful tool to modify behaviour, if applied correctly on certain individuals.

18 September 2005