

## SEPTEMBER 2011 SEMINAR SUMMARY

### **RAP About Reconciliation** **Recognising and respecting the culture of Indigenous Australians**

6.00-8.00pm, Monday 26 September 2011  
Australia Council: 372 Elizabeth Street, Surry Hills

More organisations are developing Reconciliation Action Plans. Reconciliation is a long journey that involves commitment and flexibility. A Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) provides an organisation with a framework for building positive relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Importantly, a RAP commits organisations to improving opportunities for Indigenous Australians by working in partnership to create and implement programs designed to contribute to the empowerment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

But what is a RAP and why undertake one?

What are the initial steps organisations can take and what are other organisations doing?

A Reconciliation Action Plan helps to build trust, effective relationships, and a sense of belonging for all Australians.

Join our discussion about cultural issues people should be aware of when working with Indigenous communities and learn some practical first steps in implementing a RAP in your workplace.

#### **Panel**

*Catherine Baldwin, Executive Director, Bangarra Dance Theatre*

Catherine is a respected social and commercial practitioner with over 20 years experience in social sector leadership roles including managing cultural organisations and the development of new business and social enterprises. Before Bangarra Dance Theatre, Catherine was the head of Perpetual Foundation and continues to be the chair of Young People and Arts Australia and the newly established Transfield Foundation.

*Karen Mundine, Strategic Development and Communications, Reconciliation Australia*

Karen is a tireless champion for reconciliation in her role with Reconciliation Australia. Karen has over 10 years experience in public advocacy, communications and social marketing campaigns. As a communications specialist she has been instrumental in some of Australia's watershed national events including the 1997 Australian Reconciliation Convention, Corroboree 2000 and the Centenary of Federation commemorations. Working in the Commonwealth public sector she has

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provided public relations and awareness strategies across industry including, telecommunications, sports, the arts, foreign policy and health.

### *Shelly Rowell, Sydney Opera House*

Shelly is a sustainability practitioner and an activist who has been driving environmental, social, cultural and economic outcomes in partnership with communities, business and government for 17 years. Although she holds degrees in business, management and soon sustainable development, Shelly feels that her best education has come from living and working with Aboriginal communities in Northern Territory, Western Australia and New South Wales. Shelly is currently the energy and sustainability manager at Sydney Opera House.

### **Welcome**

Kevin Golding (SAMAG) welcomed the guests Amy Hammond, Bangarra, Karen Mundine, Reconciliation Australia and Shelly Rowell, Sydney Opera House and added a few comments before handing over to Catherine Baldwin, Chair for the evening's discussion. Kevin suggested that organisations commencing a Reconciliation Action Plan be aware of cultural sensitivities when engaging with Aboriginal communities and also to be prepared to take small steps in the process.

### **Panel Discussion**

Catherine introduced Karen, a Bundjalung woman who has worked with Reconciliation Australia for a number of years. For the last 4 years, Karen has worked as Communications Director of Reconciliation Australia. "Reconciliation is about everybody", said Karen. In 2005 five organisations developed a framework for working with Aboriginal communities on a Reconciliation Action Plan. This framework identified the following key elements: relationships, respect and opportunities. Karen cautioned that if an organisation doesn't get the relationships and respect right, the rest won't necessarily work. Opportunities do not necessarily have to entail employment; this principle refers to inclusion and participation at all levels of the Reconciliation Action Plan and beyond. Karen also outlined that for a program to have legitimacy, it requires a clear action plan in conjunction with accountability.

In the corporate sector, Reconciliation Action Plans are being developed in a range of settings. These diverse settings include day care centres, hospitals, and small community groups. The NRL is currently the only national sporting code with a Reconciliation Action Plan. Two media organisations, ABC and SBS, have committed to a Reconciliation Action Plan.

A commitment to a Reconciliation Action Plan is about embedding cultural change into an organisation. As such, its purpose is to be mutually beneficial. When an organisation can establish successful partnerships, other benefits will flow. Karen then provided an example of a bank which

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was making a difference to the local Aboriginal community. As a consequence of building good relationships with this community, Aboriginal organisations took all their business there. It transpired that this business was worth a lot because of earnings from mining rights. A number of organisations with a Reconciliation Action Plan are now working in partnership and therefore have a bigger combined impact. Karen concluded by explaining that Reconciliation Australia requests organisations report back every year as part of the learning journey.

Shelly presented information on the Sydney Opera House RAP. The Sydney Opera House launched their Reconciliation Action Plan during Reconciliation Week 2011. Shelly identified the importance of consultation and acknowledged the assistance received from Reconciliation Australia in facilitating consultation. The support of CEO Richard Evans and of Wesley Enoch, who is a member of the Sydney Opera House Trust, was important to the process as was the support of the Sydney Opera House management and the Trust who all demonstrated a commitment to the Reconciliation Action Plan.

The Sydney Opera House has identified that the governance framework is key to successful implementation of the Reconciliation Action Plan. In this framework it is essential that everyone has actions to complete and that all involved talk about the meaning of the Reconciliation Action Plan with others in the organisation. Through this process stakeholders have identified respect, relationships and opportunities as key to the Sydney Opera House Reconciliation Action plan. The Sydney Opera House has targeted education, employment and programming as pathways for creating opportunities for Aboriginal people to participate and to have their culture and identity celebrated. The artwork for the Reconciliation Action Plan, for example, was sourced from local Indigenous artists from Weave Art Centre. Shelly nominated Message Sticks as an opportunity for the Sydney Opera House to deliver on programming initiatives which foreground Aboriginal arts and culture. While she acknowledged that organisations may be fearful of being paternalistic or tokenistic, Shelly encouraged organisations not to be afraid, just to start somewhere and to be sincere.

Catherine then introduced Amy Hammond, Company Manager, Bangarra and asked "What are some of the challenges involved in bringing people out of remote communities to Sydney to work?"

Amy easily identified the importance of family; that it was essential to bring the family down to Sydney as well as the performers. Speaking about the work Bangarra does with communities, Amy outlined the importance of obtaining permission regarding cultural matters; permission to participate in the life of the community and ultimately permission to tell the stories. The process requires sitting and talking with communities in order to get the protocols right. Catherine then emphasised that this could be a long negotiation process while both parties get to know each other and build respectful relationships. One of Bangarra's fundamental commitments to the

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communities they work with is to return to country to perform the work they have developed. Honouring this relationship with the community is essential for Bangarra. Amy shared an anecdote about returning to country to perform and because the dancers waited for all the elders to assemble so that they could commence, the dance was performed in the dark of night. When the dancers did appear, the audience was convinced that the dancers were spirits, emerging from the darkness. On other occasions, communities have been really amused by Bangarra's interpretation of their dances. Amy's next point serves as a reminder for all arts organisations seeking to work with Aboriginal peoples; that Aboriginal culture is a multicultural environment, not a monoculture.

In order to ensure that a RAP is not tokenistic, Karen cautioned that how an organisation follows through will determine its merits. Reconciliation Australia commences with an audit of an organisation with a view to working with Aboriginal staff within the organisation on the RAP. If there are no Aboriginal staff, then Reconciliation Australia will facilitate meetings with members of the local Aboriginal community. In addition, Karen suggested: "Ask yourself what your relationship to that person is and what are you trying to achieve."

Catherine asked the panel "What would success on reconciliation look like?" Karen envisaged the possibility of including an Aboriginal family on Neighbours as an everyday, rather than special occurrence. Shelly highlighted the acknowledgement of site, country, past and future as significant for the Sydney Opera House's view of reconciliation. Amy's vision for the future positions education and family at the forefront of reconciliation. Growing up in a family who had their culture suppressed in the Moree Catholic Mission, Amy did not have the opportunity for cultural learning, hence her keen belief in education about Aboriginal culture in schools. Karen described a RAP as "a plan for your business, not about doing for Aboriginal people." Shelly encouraged organisations to understand that a RAP will be an ongoing engagement; therefore it should be tailored to the particular arts organisation.

In general the panel concurred that a RAP should commence with modest, achievable objectives and contain realistic targets. The relationships with community and country which underpin the outcome of a RAP also require attention and ongoing respect. Listening to communities and acting on what they want for this process will inform not only the RAP but a greater cultural awareness for participants. In addition, building on existing relationships with Aboriginal people and organisations will invest the process with meaning.

In the general discussion which followed the formal proceedings, Shelly reiterated the importance of honesty and pragmatism at all stages of the process. She encouraged organisations to be honest when not achieving objectives and to realise that some goals will be harder to achieve than others. Karen agreed, proposing that the first stage of the RAP should be modest and set realistic targets, no matter how small they may seem. Amy felt strongly that building and maintaining

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relationships with community should be an ongoing process.

Canada is currently looking at Australia's RAP as a way forward in their journey with Indigenous populations in that country. After the Apology to the Stolen Generations in 2008, Canada offered a similar apology to their Indigenous peoples. Another aspect of Reconciliation Australia's work has been their involvement in the Harvard Project.

On the same day that SAMAG met to discuss the Reconciliation Action Plan, the Sydney Morning Herald featured an interview with Hetti Perkins detailing her frustrations as an Aboriginal arts professional. The resignation of a leading curator of Aboriginal Art from one of the country's major cultural institutions gives pause for thought on the importance of working together on a RAP. <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/letter-reveals-frustration-that-forced-perkins-to-quit-gallery-20110925-1krtp.html>

Seminar Summary: Aviva Finberg

### Recommended websites:

Reconciliation Australia (contains detailed information on Reconciliation Action Plan)  
<http://www.reconciliation.org.au/>

Sydney Opera House  
[http://www.sydneyoperahouse.com/about\\_us/community/reconciliation\\_action\\_plan.aspx](http://www.sydneyoperahouse.com/about_us/community/reconciliation_action_plan.aspx)  
<http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/sydney-opera-house/reconciliation-action-plan-20110530-1fbkb.html>

Bangarra Dance Theatre  
<http://www.bangarra.com.au/>

Australia Council for the Arts  
[http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/about\\_us/strategies\\_and\\_policies/cultural\\_engagement\\_framework/reconciliation\\_action\\_plan](http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/about_us/strategies_and_policies/cultural_engagement_framework/reconciliation_action_plan)