

Learning culture

About this series

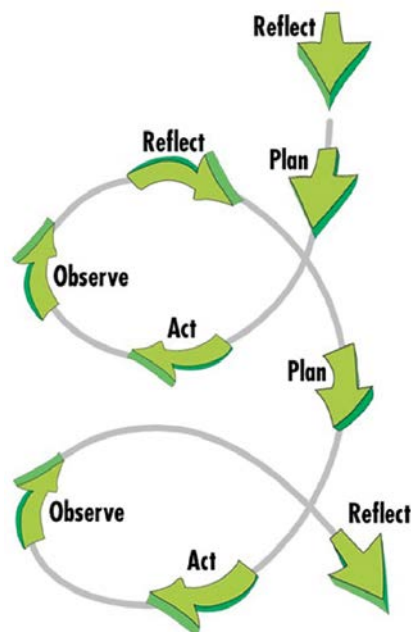
This information sheet is designed to help non-Aboriginal organisations find better ways to deliver effective and relevant services to Aboriginal people who are experiencing intergenerational poverty and homelessness. It is part of a series capturing key learning and ideas from the award-winning Wongee Mia action learning project, in Western Australia.

Action research approach

Wongee Mia is founded on an action research methodology which has helped the project build a learning culture. Reflections from yarning sessions, supervision discussions, conversations in action research sessions and feedback from Elders all contribute to the ongoing design of the project. The Research and Evaluation lead from Ruah Community Services participates in bi-monthly action research meetings with project staff. As a consequence, the project has a culture where mistakes and unsuccessful ideas are seen as part of the learning process and are safe to identify and openly discuss.

Action research, or *'learning by doing'*, recognises the observations and experiences of frontline staff and service users as valid evidence in a research process. The design of the Wongee Mia model originally consisted of a single idea - that working with a single, interconnected caseload would help Robbie sustain his tenancy and reduce the cycle of evictions within the family. The action research process tested

this concept. Other elements of the service design have grown out of the ideas of frontline workers, the ideas and knowledge of Elders, and the experiences and feedback of family members.



Working style

To build a strong learning culture, a particular style of work is encouraged. Workers begin with their personal values - a sense of what is *'right'* and what would help people the most - rather than from a set of service policies and procedures. This does not mean that organisational policies are ignored, but rather that they start by considering the *'human'* response to the challenge before them, gauging the impact this would have on the people they are trying to help, taking into account the knowledge

of the family and culture shared by the Elders, and only in this context, reflecting on organisational policies. This approach has built a culture where the project team learns from the family, Elders and their own cultural experience, and brings this experience to the fore, underpinned by organisational policy as a support to be drawn on as needed. For example, when family members ask for assistance with funerals, staff recognised their depth of grief, knowing the cultural importance of funerals and their own values. On this basis, staff agreed to assist, then look to policies around brokerage and the project budget to see how they could implement their decision.

Leadership style

Leading a project, as it grows its model through action learning, requires a particular management style to ensure the team culture and staff are supported. This includes:

- Not being risk adverse - Taking considered risks is essential to allow enough space and safety for new ideas to emerge and for the model to develop. To do this, managers need to create a safe meeting environment, where both supervisors and staff can discuss what does and does not work.
- Actively participating in both action research sessions and in the relationship with Elders (eg. having lunch with Elders, attending yarning session, actively supporting and hearing from Elders when conflict arises).

- Creating a flexible budget – Flexible brokerage funds and funding to pay Elders for their participation is needed to let the project act on its learning and ideas. Workers need to be empowered to make decisions about how they can utilise funds so they can be flexible and responsive to people’s needs.

Organisational style

Organisational style also affects the capacity for an effective learning culture to grow. Like management style, the organisation needs to be comfortable taking risks and have an innovative environment that welcomes learning. Wongee Mia was piloted with a small grant from Mercy Foundation and funds from Ruah Community Services. As the project has developed, Ruah has supported it in a way that has made its work visible and shown endorsement for its approach including:

- Showcasing the project in Ruah’s accreditation processes
- Ruah CEO meeting with family Elders on a ‘leader to leader’ footing
- Involving project staff in the over-arching Ruah Reconciliation Action Plan – and later inviting family Elders into consultations
- Nominating the project and staff for awards
- Supporting flexible outcomes-orientated reporting

Key questions for your own work:

- Can you introduce an action learning approach – by simply trying and idea, seeing if it works, then adapting it based on what you learn?
- Will your manager and organisation give your service the capacity to take risks and adapt your practices to better meet people’s needs and respond to their experiences?