

WPS DEVELOPMENTAL NOTE #29

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Topic: The Bordertown trial

Throughout the last quarter of 2005, we had five young people working full-time for Tatiara Meats in Bordertown as meat process workers on the slaughter floor.

Three important learnings came out of this trial: 1) all participants liked this sort of work; 2) the abattoir was fully capable of managing participants' work behaviour; and 3) this group operated without an external supervision apart from my fortnightly visits and telephone calls.



This company could problem solve participants' behaviour without my assistance. An example of this was the way in which they overcome the hygiene issues of the participant from Aurukun. The company saw that he was an obliging, enthusiastic worker, but he had very poor personal hygiene. He was spoken to about this problem but it made little difference. The company then came up with a good solution. They shifted him to another job, on the same salary, where personal hygiene was not an issue. See pictures below of his before and after job.



Another important outcome of this trial was the fact that participants' after work behaviour had no serious impact on their ability to maintain their employment. The point to note however, was that these participants were selected for their higher level of maturity and sense of responsibility.

On the 22 December 2005, the abattoir closed down for 10 days over the Christmas/New Year period. This situation does not arise for the horticultural groups. Rather than return these five young people to the horticultural groups located in the Riverland and Sunraysia region, I decided to fly four of the participants back home for 10 days on their promise that they would return on the 3 January 2006.

My concern was that these young people were being flown home 1 month before the completion of their 7 months agreement which is a deviation from the established structure of the scheme. If they failed to return it could have a number of damaging repercussions. Although, to get into this abattoir group participants needed to demonstrate that they are sufficiently responsible. You could say these four young people were the best the scheme had to offer. Even so, I decided it was prudent to cover the risk of them deciding not to return by offering their free flights on condition that if they failed to return they would be required to reimburse WPS for the full cost of their flight to and from Cairns. All four signed this written agreement.

The flaw in this idea was that these young people did not have the capacity to repay their debt if they did bail-up. Even if they did have the capacity to repay, the concept is dependent upon the young person honouring his word. The outcome was that three of these four participants failed to return. So what does this mean for the WPS?

I now know that two of the participants; one from Cairns and the other from Mossman Gorge, had no intentions of returning and had lied about saying they would come back; their failure to return was not due to external influences or a change of heart. Nor did they have any real plan to find employment once they got back home.

Two of the participants from Cairns and Mossman Gorge were very good at 'talking-the-talk'. That is, they were confident, articulate and skilled at disguising their true intentions. Although there was always something in the way they behaved that made me doubt their genuineness. This was why I asked them to sign a promissory note.

The third participant from Aurukun was different. Reports say that he wanted to come back but he had missed his plane. From what I understand, he missed his plane because he lacked the essential support and supervision back home. If this is true, then there was a management failure, in that I knew this young person, like so many other young people from remote communities, require considerable support and supervision and I had sent him back home without these things in place. In this sense, his failure to return was foreseeable, for the Aurukun Council and many of the townsfolk are notoriously fickle in their support of anything that requires a genuine effort to move away from their state of high dependency for personal responsibility and self-reliance.

The fourth participant who did return on the agreed date is also interesting. This young person is from Mossman and was discussed once before in WPS Developmental Note #11. This individual continues to grow from strength to strength. What's important is that he has an aunty with a great deal of influence over him and she is a strong supporter of the scheme - unlike those participants that didn't return.

This experience, like earlier experiences of sending participants home on their promise to return, had a disappointing outcome. Those who present as more likely to honour their promise often fail to do so. What is clear is that the existing structure of the scheme has been confirmed to be good at **containing** the behaviour of many participants with problem behaviour. The moment we deviate from this structure the more problems we experience. There is also some evidence that it can **change** the behaviour of some individuals.

6 January 2006