**An Indigenous Experience and Perspective**

**In the Australian Public Service**

**Submission by: Mr Leith Dewis**

I am currently the National Indigenous Liaison Officer (NILO) and Advisor (an Identified Position) for an Australian government department at the Executive Level 1 level. I first joined the APS in 1991 and for the first 9 years in the public service I worked in a mainstream position then I had the opportunity to work in Indigenous affairs and have been involved in Indigenous affairs ever since.

The issues around the recruitment, retention and promotion of Indigenous Australians in the public service although complex can be fixed.

**Stereo typing/ unconscious bias**

Many Indigenous people I know over the years have become reluctant to identify themselves within the APS as being of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander heritage due to the fear of being seen as only having the skills and ability to work in Indigenous affairs. And yes we do have a great deal of knowledge and experience about our people and culture but it’s not the only expertise we have.

There seems to be an unconscious bias that all Indigenous peoples are more suited to or want to be in roles such as liaison officers or diversity officers.

There seems to be this ongoing assumption across all government agencies and departments that when a client identifies or simply mentions that they are Indigenous that they automatically want to or need to speak to another Indigenous person or Indigenous staff member often leaving the client frustrated as they are now being transferred to another person or have to wait to be served by someone else. We need to take the fear away and ensure all service delivery staff across the APS have the ability and skills to assist anyone regardless of ones’ racial or cultural heritage.

**Recruitment**

The recruitment process and pathways for Indigenous peoples to join the public service are mainly promoted through the APS graduate and cadetship program but not all Indigenous Australians want to study to enter the workforce they simply want to have direct access to paid and long term employment.

Indigenous Australians currently working in the public service are constantly given reminders about how effective the APS graduate and cadetship programs are in recruiting Indigenous Australians however for many years the numbers joining via these programs weren’t increasing or adding to the Indigenous workforce they were simply replacing the numbers of Indigenous peoples who left the public service.

Although there are many discussions about the retention and promotion of the Indigenous workforce there has been no affirmative or real action taken to do so. As a result many Indigenous peoples get disillusioned and leave the public service. A very large percentage of the Indigenous workforce in the APS are still at the APS3 – 4 level and never progress beyond that pay point.

**Cultural Awareness/ cultural competencies**

Although over the years there have been some improvements within the APS regarding cultural awareness and cultural competencies many Indigenous peoples become disillusioned and only see a tokenistic approach to not only increasing cultural awareness within an organisation but changing the views and culture within an organisation.

Unfortunately senior executives and senior staff within the APS only view cultural awareness and cultural competencies training as something that their staff need to participate in. There has long been a view from senior staff throughout the APS that cultural awareness and cultural competency training should not and cannot be made mandatory for staff and unfortunately Indigenous Australians and Indigenous staff have been asking why not.

The areas within government agencies responsible for Indigenous affairs, Indigenous programs and Indigenous policy development need to have mandatory cultural awareness and cultural competencies and the expertise and skills to engage, consult and communicate with the Indigenous population and communities in a culturally appropriate and sensitive manner.

Reconciliation Action Plans, Reconciliation Week activities and NAIDIOC Week activities cannot and must not continue to be seen and implemented as a tick and flick exercise they need to be real action plans and activities with real outcomes with true engagement participation and consultation with Indigenous peoples, communities and staff.

Due to the lack of cultural awareness and cultural sensitivities Indigenous staff feel a lack of respect and become disillusioned when they are constantly judged by their peers and having to explain culture practices such as sorry business (family and community death) and made to feel that they are breaking the rules or doing something wrong for simply practicing culture. Once again Indigenous people become disillusioned and leave the APS.

**Senior Leadership Positions**

Indigenous Australians and Indigenous staff working in the APS have always had an ongoing concern that there is little or no Indigenous representation at the senior executive and senior management level across the APS and if there is they are usually in an Indigenous affairs departments or Indigenous program areas.

Why is there no effective career pathway for Indigenous peoples to gain access to senior executive and senior management positions that are not Identified or Indigenous specific and if there is why is there limited or no uptake from the Indigenous workforce to participate or compete.

Leith Dewis

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