

Launch by Western Sydney Community Forum of a Resource Handbook: 'Developing a Common Language between Corporations and Small Community Organisations'

Partnerships for a Stronger Civil Society

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On 27 April 2012, at the Mount Druitt Community Hub, I had the chance to participate in the launch by Western Sydney Community Forum of a valuable new Resource Handbook: 'Developing a Common Language between Corporations and Small Community Organisations'. Evidence-based, it is informed by a collaborative research project undertaken in partnership with the Westpac Foundation and the University of Western Sydney.

The Handbook is intended to assist small community-based organisations forge closer relationships with companies and corporate foundations. It sets out a clear framework within which both sides can establish their joint expectations by speaking a 'common language'. In particular it is a useful guide to local associations on how to win support from business – not an easy task for the small and micro-enterprises that comprise so much of Australia's not-for-profit sector. This is unfortunate. Whilst they may fail to meet the Treasury test of 'economically significant', small organisations are often vital at the local level. They deliver low-cost support and services to disadvantaged clients and in the process help to build the networks of social capital that create communities.

I am the Patron of one such small community organisation, Bridges Inc., based in Blacktown. Its Executive Officer, the irrepressible Tirrania Suhood, was the driving force behind the *Bridges Network Approach* which seeks to create scale through connecting a number of small organisations in a shared approach to engaging marginalised people. That ethos – of building scale through collaboration – underpinned Tirrania's role in founding Voice for SONG – not, as you might surmise, a choir for the homeless but a forum for Small Organisations Non Government.

The question is, can these organisations, operating on a shoe-string and employing only a couple of over-stretched community workers, really compete for corporate support with older, larger, better-known and better-resourced not-for-profits?

The answer is, perhaps. Smaller community-based enterprises have at least three characteristics that may attract social investment and philanthropic support from corporate Australia.

First, there is the value of neighbourhood. Many Australian businesses, including well-known national brands, see an advantage in being identified with support for local communities.

Indeed as manufacturing industry has declined, and the service economy become dominant, large workplaces have become the exception. The biggest Australian and multinational companies are distributed across hundreds of locations. Before you picture the fast-food restaurant chains think also of retail stores, banks, petrol stations, hotels and residential property developers. Such companies may well see reputational advantage in having their brand associated with community support in the particular localities in which they operate.

Second, local engagement provides a sense of authenticity. This is vital in appealing to the emotional intelligence of potential corporate supporters.

A bold mission can sound grand, whether it's protecting biodiversity, finding a cure for leukemia or providing support for people with a disability. It can also sound a bit remote. An advantage for a small community organisation is that it is able to demonstrate to a company how it delivers social impact on the street – distributing food, providing shelter, helping refugees, assisting carers or in a hundred other concrete instances of mission at work. Of course, the authenticity of the experience can be enhanced if company employees can be directly involved in the organisation's activities through workplace giving schemes or corporate volunteering programs.

Third, one should recognise the power of small-scale. Small can be beautiful in the community sector. Indeed some important forms of support can only be delivered at the neighbourhood or local level.

One such example, to which I have on occasion provided assistance in Canberra, is Bosom Buddies. There are hundreds of worthy organisations, many large, competing for funds in the area of cancer alleviation. Often they focus on medical research or health care. Bosom Buddies, by contrast, actively supports women diagnosed with breast cancer by ensuring that they are able to talk to someone who's already been through the same traumatic experience. Such person-to-person community support can only work at the local level – although, as Bridges has suggested, the model can be scaled by collaborating with similarly motivated organisations in other locations.

It's worth remembering, too, that the majority of Australian business enterprises, like most not-for-profit organisations, are small. As politicians like to remind us, together they power 'the engine-room of the economy'. Local companies, like local governments, are likely to be attracted to supporting activities which improve the local community in which they do business. One could be forgiven for believing, on the basis of media coverage, that it's only large corporations that appreciate the business value of behaving in a socially responsible manner. Luckily it's not true. Many small businesses are good corporate citizens.

So do take a look at the 'Developing a Common Language' Resource Handbook. It's a good example of action-research. Most importantly, it's a powerful reminder that building community-business partnerships is just as important to small and local not-for-profit organisations as it is to their larger and better-known counterparts.