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Smarter, Stronger, Healthier:
How high–expectation relationships create healthier communities

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An address on community pathways by

Dr Chris Sarra

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Indigenous Advisory Council;
Stronger Smarter Institute Chair
(Watch here | Listen here | Bio)

About the address:

Once you get a notion in your mind, it can be remarkably hard to shift it. Chris Sarra has spent his career fighting the strongly held assumptions Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people hold about themselves, and those foisted upon them by others. His Stronger Smarter Institute puts into practice his belief that higher expectation relationships will create stronger, smarter classrooms – and healthier communities.

(To see the visual images that accompany this presentation, watch the video)

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Chris Sarra:

Thank you very much, it's lovely to be back. Was it 2005? That's a while ago; I would have had all black hair back then. It's so nice to be here, this is a big crowd. I want to start by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land. I am delighted to be here. Thank you for your reference to rugby league, real football; I'll explain that to you as we go. You'll get there. If you can embrace the Melbourne Storm we can embrace a new national anthem, I'm sure of that.

I want to just give you a bit of an insight into that whole "stronger, smarter" approach. The last time I was here it was a philosophical approach that was just taking off and since then I left the Cherbourg School, where we did pretty well, and we've worked with more than 450 schools right across Australia to get them to understand this philosophical approach, and it's an approach designed to do things "with" people, not "to" people.

My intention is to give you a sense of where all of that came from and in order to do that I probably will get a little bit autobiographical along the way and just share some thoughts and then later on we get to ask some questions. By the way, any question is okay; if you want to ask me about rugby league – the greatest game of all – I can talk with you about that. And it is State of Origin week this week; you've probably got no idea what that actually means, but it's why I'm wearing this tie. Yes, I go for Queensland. Any New South Wales supporters in the room? Good luck with that. [laughter] No – we mustn't tease the New South Wales supporters because you did get one in a row; remember that? Okay.

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So this “stronger, smarter” thing; let me tell you all about it. So this is my country, right? My grandmother’s country is Gurang Gurang and my hometown is Bundaberg; that’s my grandfather’s country. This [refers to photograph] is the Burnett River that you can see on the bottom. It’s in south–east Queensland. That’s my country and it’s really special to be able to stand here and say that, that I’ve grown up on my country. That river that you can see there, I have fished in that river ever since I was young and it’s a really strengthening feeling to sit there and think “man, my people have fished in this river for thousands of years”. It’s a very cool thing. So that’s a little bit about my country and where I’m from.

You’ll see [refers to photograph] the Burnett River there, and this here is the house that I grew up in, and straight across the road is the Millaquin Mill – that’s where they make Bundaberg Sugar. You’ve all seen that right? Bundaberg Sugar? There’s probably some outside there. The school that I went to is up there – Bundaberg East State School. It’s closed down and they’ve moved to a flasher location, but my point is that in the afternoons or in the mornings we’d walk home from school. Sometimes we’d walk this way, sometimes we’d walk this way and you can see there are some huge sheds here and in those sheds they just put sugar on the ground, like sand dunes. So on the way home, just for fun, if we were bored, we’d run up and down these sand dunes and roll down; we’d have sugar in our hair. That’s why I’m sweet. All these black kids would be rolling down the sugar and then they’d package it all up like that and they’ll send it out to you.

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This one here [refers to photograph], we all know this one, right? Bundaberg Rum? That's made in this place here; so there's a tap that comes under here – I'm kidding about that, I'm joking, I'm joking. The truth is I don't drink Bundaberg Rum. Me and Bundaberg Rum went out one night when I was 19; we have never been out since. So that's that.

So here's my family. This is my father; my father was Italian. He was born in a village called Miglianico in Abruzzo in Italy in 1924 and then came out to Australia in 1952 and was a hard worker and he just taught us the value of work. You can see my family there – we were a pretty rag–tag mob; six boys and four girls in my family. An interesting thing about my father was that he had a wife and three kids in Italy before he came out to Australia. He got with my mum, had ten kids; he was pretty fertile. He knew how to make them.

So yes, six boys in my family and one of the neat things was that my father, although he was never a good speaker of English, he worked very hard. When he wasn't working for the city Council doing kerbing and channeling, he'd be out on the small crops and we'd be out there with him picking tomatoes, or pumpkins, or zucchinis, or bird's eye chilies that we would send to Melbourne, and then in the summer time we'd pick tobacco. I must have picked a million tobacco leaves in my day. But it was a nice thing, you know, because I remember being out in the paddock at seven or eight years old and occasionally you'd go and pick a little bit and then you'd go and sit on the tractor and have a rest.

But by the time I was 13 or 14, I was picking my own row and I was getting paid a man's wages and there was something special about that because very clearly we'd made that transition from boyhood into manhood in the tobacco fields.

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And we'd learned things in life; that if you're going to get paid a man's wage you have to pick your row and if you slack off, then somebody else has got to come and pick up your row.

I also was taught that you don't stop until the job's finished, otherwise you let other people down. It was an important message and I learned the value and learnt to enjoy hard work. I still do; I still do enjoy it.

My mum is quite a champion, but in different ways to what my father was. She was a very strong, very proud Aboriginal woman. You see that house there? [Refers to photograph] That's the house that I grew up in. You see that chimney across the road; that's not coming out of our roof, that's the chimney for Millaquin Mill.

I didn't realise this until I wrote my book some years later, that my mum sort of created a force field around our house that made growing up positive and made us strong.

I was born in 1967, and I grew up in this house, in east Bundaberg. Joh Bjelke-Petersen was still the Premier; remember that? Don't you worry about that man. [laughter] Over the back of our house was this guy who used to throw rocks at us when we were kids; he used to call my mum an old black gin and things like that and when we were out the front playing football, he'd swerve his car at us and you'd try to make sense of what that was all about, but you never ever do really.

The guy over the side, on the other side of our house, would call us little black bastards and try to accuse us of stealing his chooks and all of that kind of thing.

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He was an old drunk and we'd see him in the afternoons come around and fall off his bike and we'd still go and pick him up and take him home to his wife. And his wife was a lovely old woman; she'd say "oh you should have left the old bastard out there", but we just never did. And I put that down to the lessons my mum used to give us. Because she would teach us about racism and how to deal with it and she'd teach us about being a good human being and things like that, and that's in part probably why we went and picked that old fellow up, in spite of how he spoke about us.

My mum's brothers, for whatever reason, did succumb to the racism that existed in society and some of them turned to alcoholism and we did see domestic violence and things like that in and around our family, but never in our house. We were kind of protected from that and somehow my mother and my father created this sort of household where it was respected. I remember as a kid, my old uncles would come to our place – not ever to get on the charge or anything like that – but usually to dry out and get themselves back on track and get their head clear and then off they'd go. It was a pretty special thing.

And then we would see our old uncles over north Bundaberg under the bridge, with a flagon, lying down, charged up, and my mum always said, "don't you ever turn your back on your family, that's your family and there are reasons why they are where they are and you must never turn your back on them." Anyway, I think we received great messages growing up about just honouring the humanity of others.

I finished school in 1984; it was quite a year to finish school. I was a pretty ugly baby when I was young, as you can see. So it was '84, and look, we had a good time at school, again we'd be subjected to racism, but we never let it put us down.

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Again, we'd come home and we'd cry to Mum, "Oh, they're calling us black coons and black niggers" and my mum would say to us "Yes, you are black and don't you ever let anybody put you down, you're no better, no worse than any other man and don't you ever put yourself below anybody else."

And then we'd have this conversation about racism and why they would try to put us down and she'd say, "It's like they see you up here and they are down here."

It's funny, you know, because I was having this same conversation with my son, Marcellus, who got called a "black c***" on the bus about six months ago. He came home to me and I had the same conversation. I said, "Look, it's like they see you up here and they're feeling like they're down there and the only way they think they can bring you down to the same level as them is by the colour of your skin, or saying something about you being Aboriginal. But you and me both know that being Aboriginal is special, that there's something magical, and we're the First Australians, we're the ones who carry the blood of the very first Australians, and you can't ever let anybody pull you down."

And then when you understand it in that context, you kind of actually start to feel sorry for those people who are down here. And then we have a conversation about how to lift them up and try to make them feel better about themselves so that they don't have to try and put us down. Interesting, hey? So that's that.

I'll go back a step. In 1984, I finished high school; grade 12 and everybody's talking about these QTAC forms and I'm thinking, "What the hell is that? What does that mean?" QTAC stands for "Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre", it was the form you'd fill in if you wanted to go to college.

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So I go and see the guidance counsellor; I said, “What is this QTAC thing?” He said, “Oh, that’s the form you fill in if you want to go to college or university.” He says, “You’ve got enough board subjects.” I thought, “I don’t even know what that means.” Anyway, he says, “What would you like to do?” And I said, “I don’t know, that’s what I came to see you for”. He says, “What do you think is the best job?” I loved phys ed at school, I loved the thought of not being locked inside all the time, and I said “phys ed teacher”. He says, “Well, let’s put that down.” He says, “You won’t get into phys ed because the score is too high, but we’ll put these other courses down.” The other courses were for an agricultural college.

So I filled in this form and I walked out the door thinking, “What the hell was that all about?” I still had no idea. But anyway, just by chance, it went off. Summer commenced, I was finished high school, went to prom – getting flashbacks now – we don’t have to talk about that. But I’m off in the tobacco and then I get this letter in the mail that says, “This is how smart you are, 750, that’s your score” and it was like smack, bang, in the middle – the average, right in the middle of the bell curve.

I thought when you were in school all you had to do was pass your tests and that was fine; I didn’t realise that the higher your grades go the more options you’d get. I didn’t really understand that at the time.

So I got this score, 750, and then a couple of days later I get this other letter in the mail that says, “We know that you want to study phys ed.”

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It was from this place here [refers to photograph], Kelvin Grove Teacher's College. It says, "We know you want to do phys ed, we know you haven't got the right score, we're just running this program where we want to get more Aboriginal teachers into secondary schools, come down for an interview, we'll see what you've got and we'll go from there." So I go down, I do an interview, I write a good essay; they think I can do it.

And then I'm looking at this score of mine that tells me how smart I am and then I'm looking at the entry score for phys ed, which was 910, and I'm thinking, "No, I don't think so" and they said, "Oh no, don't worry about that because that's just a screening process, what actually happens is the course is three years." In those days, you could do a three–year teaching diploma and then you could start teaching after three years; this was back before the Iraq war. And they said, "We'll just spread your course out over four years and just start off in a gentle workload, 60%, and then we'll build you up as you get more confident."

So I had a look at this and I had a look at that and I thought, "Alright, let's do this." I got in and I started off on a 60% workload, was going okay, then went to a 90% workload, and then somewhere in there, I met a fellow called Dr Gary MacLennan, a feisty Irishman. I put that picture [refers to photograph] of the Bjelke–Petersen riots there, because my mum and I were watching TV, first mid–semester break, she's saying, "What's it like, this teacher's college?" I said, "Oh, it's okay, I've got this mentor called Gary." And as we were watching the news, they'd thrown this guy in a paddy wagon at these rallies; I said, "That's him there, that's the guy."

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So Gary got me to reflect on my life and reflect on my time in school and have another look. In my book I described the circumstance where my mum and dad had kindled a sense of fire in my belly and Gary had come along and threw petrol on it. Because he really did grab me by the intellectual scruff of the neck and make me see the world differently. He got me to go and talk to my mum about her education, which I did, and I hadn't really thought to do up until then.

I asked, "What was school like for you, Mum?" She said, "Well, I only went to grade three, or grade four" and I said, "How come, why didn't you go to high school?" She said, "Well we weren't allowed, they just thought of us as uncivilised natives, they didn't think we could learn."

And then I talked to my older sister about her education and she says, "Oh yes, I remember old Havis. When we were in grade two, and Grant and I were in the classroom, she says to the whole class, "Tomorrow I'm going to bring in a bathtub and I'll wash these Aboriginal kids because they stink"."

And you think, "Man, imagine if you were an eight–year–old trying to make sense of that." Imagine, my sister lives not far from me now and she's got her own kids and I just think of those Aboriginal parents who were getting smashed around for supposedly not valuing education and if that's the experience that they had, then why the hell would they value something that would do that to you, you know? It's interesting. Then I reflect on my own experience and find out – do you know what – I've been sold short by school as well and that score of 750 didn't really actually tell me how smart I truly was.

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By this stage I'm 17 years old, I'm loaded with testosterone, and I start to get a bit angry about this and I go and see the people who are organising my course and I say, "I want to finish this course in three years, the same as everybody else." What that meant was I was going to have to catch up and do more work than all the other kids who had this score; so for the last two years I was going to have to work 110/120% workload to catch up on what I didn't do before. Does that make sense?

So that's what I did. I worked my arse off in those last two years. I worked really hard. I had to put my illustrious rugby league career on hold – greatest game of all – because I was so determined to finish, and I did. And you think that I would be happy to be finished, but the truth is I was even more angry because I thought, "How the hell can you have a circumstance where the system will tell me this is how smart I was, yet the last two years I've worked harder than the kids who got this score and I did more than them?" Some had dropped out for whatever reasons, but I got through and smashed it. How could I be led to believe that I was only worth this much? And if I was sold short like that, how many other black kids are sold short like that? And how many other kids in general are sold short, because teachers don't believe in who they are and what they can achieve because of the colour of their skin or what side of the railway track they live on?

[Refers to photograph] This is the Normanby Hotel, where I fell in love; there was quite a few times, actually. When we finished teacher's college, we did the last exam and they were all saying, "There's no jobs for teaching, there's no jobs anymore." I think they say that every year.

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But anyway, we had been out celebrating at the Normanby Hotel and then I get this call the next morning, early in the morning – so early, it's like half past ten – and I pick up the phone. In those days it was like – the phone, you can't just grab the phone like that, you've got to get up and walk to the phone and the ring was really loud, hurting my head. And I'm like, "Hello" and this big voice comes down the phone, "This is Frank Underwood from the Department of Education in the Darling Downs and I would like to speak to Mr Chris Sarra." "Yes, this is me." "We have a job for you teaching at Cecil Plains, secondary phys ed and English, are you likely to accept this position?" "Yes, I'll accept the position." And then he says, "Do you know where Cecil Plains is?" And I've never heard of Cecil Plains but was just on the other side of the Toowoomba Range; so I was a teacher and off I went.

I went on this journey all over the place, got some messages along the way. Went back to Bundaberg – I won't go into all of that – but I ended up as Principal at Cherbourg School, I would have talked about that the last time I was here, but we worked pretty hard there, we turned things around, we got some good results; from 62 to 94% (attendance). I often smile when I watch the Indigenous Affairs Minister trying to come out with this big stick approach and all of that kind of thing; they say, "Well, we've got a 0.5% shift in attendance with this big stick truancy approach." We didn't do any of that, we didn't threaten to cut people's welfare payments; we just worked with people to create a school that kids wanted to turn up to, regardless of their home circumstances. I can come back to that later if you like.

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I was in Cherbourg the weekend before last, actually. Five teacher aides went on to teaching. I ran into one who's still teaching at the school, who came off a work–for–the–dole program; he's the phys. ed. teacher there. The training program that I put them on was called RATEP – Remote Area Teacher Education Program – and one of the ladies who I'd put on to go through that program, she was now the coordinator of that program; hell of a story.

We set up the Stronger Smarter Institute because I didn't want to go to another school, it didn't make sense to go to another school when I'd finished at Cherbourg; it didn't make sense to go into academia, even though I'd been writing my PhD and had finished it while I was running the school, and it didn't make sense to go and work in central office either; but that's a whole other story.

So the Institute's been running for the last 12 years – I ran it for 10 years. Like I said, we worked with more than 450 schools with a reach of more than 20–something–thousand Indigenous kids. One of the things I really like along the way is that we've done good things for poor white kids as well, because as I've said in other places, they're just as infected by this toxic stench of low expectations; so it's been nice to be able to create a shift in the profession for them as well.

This [refers to slide] is what we call the Stronger Smarter philosophy – a lot of very sexy words up there, but basically it's about honouring that positive sense of identity; acknowledging and embracing positive community leadership anchored by higher expectations relationships.

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When we talk about "high expectations relationships", we talk about those which honour the humanity of others and in so doing, acknowledge one's strengths, capacity and human right to emancipatory opportunity. I want to just drill down on some of those key points.

In conversations with teachers – and it's no different to conversations with you, in the work that you do, whether you're health workers, whether you work in a not–for–profit on whatever sorts of issues you work with – when it comes to working with Aboriginal clients, it's pretty clear, you have a choice. You can either design the work that you do, or the way you engage families or individuals, to nurture a stereotype, or smash it to bits; at some level it's that simple. In schools, we have this kind of stereotypical view that exists and as teachers, we either collude with that or smash it to bits.

If you take the one for poor health, for instance. If I'm a teacher in a classroom and I've got Aboriginal kids running around with a snotty nose and I never say, "Go and blow your nose, we don't have snotty noses in this classroom," and I just say, "Oh well, that's just how Aboriginal kids are," well then I'm actually colluding with that stereotype and I'm allowing it to be true, when it has no right to be true.

If I'm a Principal and I haven't got the courage to go and sit down with parents to talk about why their kids are not coming to school consistently and I just say, "Oh no, that's that family, that's the Aboriginal families, they've got hard lives, blah, blah, blah," then I'm actually colluding with that perception and making it more true than it needs to be.

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Interestingly, some Aboriginal kids, some Aboriginal clients that you might work with, will collude with that perception as well, you know; thinking that that's their cultural identity, when in fact it's not a cultural identity, it's just a negative stereotype that we're tricked into thinking is our cultural identity. I'll come back to that point later on.

I want to talk to you about this notion of being "other" and being "same", because it's one of those things that confuses us a bit; so let me just share this sort of intellectual insight with you. I ask you to reflect on that for your own purposes, if that's useful (and I think it will be), and I'll come back to why I want you to think about this when you're working with Aboriginal clients; trying to build healthier communities. Because we get tricked into this thing about saying, "Well, are you Aboriginal, are you Italian, are you Australian, or what?" Or you see these redneck nutjobs, "Everybody's Australian blah, blah, blah," banging their fist and getting grumpy for whatever reason. But if we understand the notion of identity in this way, then we're set free from a lot of that kind of – how would you say – bullshit, I suppose.

Alright, so you heard me say my father was Italian, my mum's Aboriginal, we live in Australia; so you might say to me, "Well, are you Italian or Aboriginal or white?" Well, the truth is if I perceive my identity in this way, which I do, then I'm all of those things and so at my core, like you, I"m human and my sense of cultural identity is a mediation upon my core humanity; or like a layer, if you like. There's this Aboriginal layer, there's this Italian layer, there may be an Australian layer and each of those mediations will resonate according to time and place, depending on the context.

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When I'm in Abruzzo in Miglianico and I'm speaking Italian with my half–brother, my sense of being Italian is resonating very strongly.

In that moment, because of what I'm doing, and if I'm standing at the graves of my father, my Nono and my Nona, then my sense of being Italian is resonating very strongly because of where I am and what I'm doing and what is happening in that time and that place. In that moment I feel very Italian and I'm fiercely proud of that. I haven't surrendered my sense of being Aboriginal, it's just not resonating as strongly; does that make sense?

But when I'm home at my beautiful Burnett River and I'm fishing there, thinking about how cool it is to be fishing in my people's river, I look across, I see Paddy's Island, I know that in the last 180 years, some of my ancestors were slaughtered over there and I wonder about what it was like for them; my sense of being Aboriginal resonates really strongly upon my core humanity.

When the bloke over the back is calling me a little black bastard or something like that, or I'm getting subjected to low expectations in school, or I'm standing here talking to you about Indigenous communities, my sense of being Aboriginal resonates upon my core humanity really strongly. I haven't surrendered my sense of being Italian; it's just not resonating as strongly. Does that make sense?

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And so most of my life, positively or negatively, my sense of being Aboriginal resonates the strongest, so when I stand and I listen to a national anthem that pushes me to the margins and pretends I don't exist, because this nation's supposed to be young and free, but I know that we've been here 50,000 years; that makes my sense of being Aboriginal resonate more strongly.

There are times when my sense of being Australian might resonate, but not a lot, I've got to say. I don't want to sound disrespectful, but the Australian flag doesn't float my boat, you know? When I think Australian flag, I think of Cronulla riots, I think of Pauline Hanson wrapping her dirty body in that Australian flag; so if anything, that's quite a repelling thought. Yet, I don't want to be disrespectful, because people would have fought under that flag and all that. So, I acknowledge those things, but I don't feel connected to that. I mentioned that I don't feel connected to the anthem.

But when I think of being Australian – one day I was sitting on a plane, up in business class, and the lady comes and she gives me toast and I said, "Haven't you got any Vegemite?" and she says, "Yes, I'll go and get some for you." And then this American lady sitting next to me, she says, "Boy, you sure know you're on an Aussie plane when you can get Vegemite just like that." So I thought, "Yes, maybe that's my sense of being Australian."

And maybe it was when my mum's house – that house you saw before – got smashed in the 2013 floods, thankfully my mum was gone by then, but I remember standing at the front of the house with my brother and we were just looking at this house and we didn't know where to start and all these people just turned up from nowhere and just helped us, like mud army style.

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And I thought, "Yes, maybe that's a very Australian thing to do, who knows?"

So what's the point of all this? Well, I think it becomes relevant for you and for me when we make decisions in our organisations or the places that we work in, about outcomes for Aboriginal families, or Aboriginal clients, or anything like that.

One of the mistakes I think we make is that we forget about the core humanity and we get stuck on the mediation of being Aboriginal and then we make our decisions about what's good enough for those families. We decide, Aboriginal family; that's where we need to go.

But my point is this; that every time what we need to do is to drop down to the core humanity that we share and at that level, we need to decide what outcomes are good enough for Aboriginal children, or Aboriginal families. And then at that level of the core humanity, when we decide that that's where we need to go, as opposed to there, once we've decided that that's where we need to go, then we need to remember and take into account that mediation of being Aboriginal and factor that in to the pursuit of getting to that outcome.

I think in other similar sorts of ways I watch these mistakes being made when we work with kids, or families with disabilities. I imagine that that disability could be construed as another layer upon core humanity, and it's another place I think where we forget to drop down to the level of the core humanity and we get stuck on that mediation of disability, or Aboriginal and often that's loaded with contaminated kind of perceptions about what's good enough. And that's why we end up there, instead of dropping down to here and ending up there; make sense? Think about that.

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Oops, sorry; I don't know how that got there. I'm going to jump across this; I'll just talk to you about leadership. I mentioned the notion of embracing positive community leadership, as opposed to that kind of "booting the victim" type leadership, which is very problematic, or that kind of "being the victim" type leadership.

If you look at it, it's "being the victim" that is what I would argue as a low expectations kind of one that will collude with that negative stereotype and so will the "booting the victim" type one. It might appear like it's got high expectations, but really it just perpetuates that sort of negative stereotype.

What I'm arguing is, in your work you should be looking to collaborate with a beyond the victim type leadership. I want to just share this story with you about a guy who worked with me at the school; Hooper. In the book I was talking about how when I was at the school I would often work back late and these drunks would walk through and they'd stop in and want to talk and often it was the same old conversation going around and round. Hooper was one of those guys. One of these vagabond friends was Hooper Coleman; he was such a rogue with the blackest skin wrapped around a stocky, yet reasonably muscular body. Every scar on his face and body had its own story about fights he had gotten into, Police he had run from in his younger days; but most were about some lady he had loved and forsaken. He had a lot of scars.

Hooper would sometimes stumble in telling me that he'd been drinking metho and it would be clear from the smell that he was talking straight with me. Hooper never bothered me in the same way that others did though, because I was often so intrigued by the things he would tell me about – and I just talked about a whole bunch of things.

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To many Hooper might have seemed like just some old drunk, but he was offering me an amazing insight into the challenges of Aboriginal people in the 1960's and 70's – and I just talked a little bit about what those differences were.

I was blown away by Hooper's stories of the cruel treatment he received as a small child, growing up on the Cherbourg boys' dormitory. The fact that he decided to escape spoke volumes to me about what type of man he was and the strength of his spirit. He would not be assimilated in accordance with the policy intent of the time. Despite such cruelty, Hooper remained true to his sense of self, true to his people and true to his spirit –I went onto other things. Hooper was obviously intelligent and well read, yet it seemed in a conventional context, he had little to show for it; in part, I guess it may have been because he didn't step up into the right places at the right times.

Conversely I'm also certain it was partly because the people he encountered simply didn't have the capacity to embrace the leadership skills that he had to offer. Maybe this was because he didn't come in the conventional leadership package. Maybe it was because it was easier to oppress and contain him, rather than engage him in some type of authentic dialogue, in which all would be challenged and as a result be better. Whatever it was, I was not going to make the same mistake on missing out on what he had to offer.

Now this is me talking to him – "Hey brother, you ever thought about coming to work here at the school with me – I've got nearly all females on staff and I need some strong males in the place?"

"What, you looking for a new groundsman or something?"

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“No, no, I need to see you in the classroom, these kids have got to see you in action and they need to hear the things that you’ve got to say.”

“Oh yes, I reckon I could give that a crack,” he replied, as I edged closer to cutting a deal with him. As he thought about it he became even more animated. “You know, these kids are really smart, but they just got to be given a chance. They got hard lives some of them, but they just need someone to kick them along and keep telling them they can do it. It was bad enough all the shit I had to go through when I was a kid and I don’t want to see them end up like me, they got a lot of opportunities now and if they can just step up and get that little bit of a kick along, they can really go places. Not like me; that’s what I want them to do.”

It was an awesome soliloquy; I watched on in silence, mesmerised. A flicker of light was emerging from the darkness of his life. In this one conversation Hooper had shifted from being just some old drunk who most people didn’t take too seriously, to a man committed to changing the lives of the children of Cherbourg and ensuring that they were projected into a future that was better than his past. I’ve always been amazed at the leadership you can see when you give it a place to be.

I watch on with some frustration at organisations who think that they’ve got to employ white fellows, because black fellows can’t do the job of working with their own families; because they don’t perceive them to have the leadership skills and it’s only because they’re not in the leadership package that we see, when in fact the leadership may well be right in front of you the whole time. And I guess that is my message.

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But because we've constructed an image in our own head of what it looks like, we might completely miss it; so if you learn nothing from me today, learn about shifting that perception of what leadership looks like because it may well be in front of you.

I'll just finish up on this notion of high expectations relationship and then we can take some questions and I want to point out the difference between what is high expectations and a high expectations relationship; it's quite different. In a school setting, a Principal might say "Yes, well I've got high expectations, if kids don't turn up with their blazer and uniform with shoes and socks on, well I'll send them home, because in our school I've got high expectations," when that Principal might argue with me. She might say "Well that's high expectations," and I would say "Yes, you're probably right, but that's not a high expectations relationship."

And so in a high expectations relationship, one might put the suggestion that we'd love to see all kids in uniform and shoes and socks and in a relationship we might sit at the table with some old grandma who says "Yes look, that's fine, I would love that, but I've got eight kids in the house and I can't afford it and I know that the kids are not going to turn up if they've got a dirty uniform because they'll be shamed."

And so in the confines of the relationship, we discover these complexities and we work out how to attend to them and co–create the solutions and in that circumstance, if we're prepared to let go of the power and embrace the power that exists there and acknowledge that it exists there, then anything is possible, you know? All of a sudden, things aren't as complex as they seem; they're still hard, but we're a better chance of cracking the solutions.

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In that circumstance I've seen a situation where the Principal says "Alright, so that I'm not lowering the bar, we still insist that they wear uniform, but I'll buy them. And so that we're not giving you a handout, because I know you'd feel ashamed if that was the case – eight uniforms, that equates to this many hours – we would love to have you come and read for the kids and just spend time." So we co-created a solution in that kind of way; does that make sense?

You'll know about this notion of a notional bank account building relationships; so I won't go into that, I can come back to it if you want. I'll just run to that last point about making it personal. So when I used to run Cherbourg school and when I do anything now, I try to imagine the people that I'm working with, particularly in the school thing. When I was Principal of the school, I would pretend that when I'm having a conversation with a teacher, that actual conversation was about my own child.

So when I'm having this conversation at the teacher, the question's going around in my head "would I let you teach my own child, or my own nephew or niece?" And if the answer is no, then there's no way that I'm going to let you teach anybody else. That's what I mean by making it personal.

I remember one day I was in the office and I hear this lady swearing out the front, "I want to see this fucking Principal, this and that, blah, blah, blah, the school's supposed to be strong and smart" and she was going to town; very angry. And so I'm thinking about this and I'm thinking "this is a bit confronting." I remember literally staring myself in the mirror and saying "Okay, looking for the strength".

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Straight away I'm thinking "This lady must love her kid because she's up here to make a song and dance about it" – tick – okay. And then I think to myself "What if this was my own big sister that I was going to talk to, how would I want her spoken to by the Principal, what outcomes would I want from this meeting that's about to happen?"

When my big sister's home, talking to her husband about what happened with "that dickhead Principal" or something like that, how do I want her reflecting on that conversation? And so once I kind of got into that frame, imagining that this was my big sister and I was going to talk about my own nephews and nieces; then you head out the door, you take your ego off and you hang it up there because you know you're going to get some skin off, or something like that. And then you have the conversation; you wash through the grumpiness and you get down to the real conversation about how we work together to get the best for your child.

And I just think if we can think of that and that's just as applicable in your areas as it is in mine, you know? So when you're working with clients, it doesn't hurt to stop and ask yourself "What if this was my own sister, what if this was my own nephew or niece that I was working with?" Make sense? So that's what I mean by making it personal. I think that's probably a good place to pull up; so I'm going to stop and say thank you for listening and take some questions, assuming we've got heaps of time left.

Thank you.

ENDS

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