

# Deep Listening and Leadership: An Indigenous Model of Leadership and Community Development in Australia

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## **Introduction: Leaders as Deep Listeners**

This chapter describes an organic model of community leadership that is underpinned by the Indigenous concept of Deep Listening. Within the chapter, stories and messages from community leaders provide living examples of how to incorporate Deep Listening into leadership practices. The concept of Deep Listening appears in many Aboriginal languages in Australia. For example, in the Ngangikurungkurr language of the Daly River in the Northern Territory, the word for Deep Listening is *Dadirri*. In the Yorta Yorta language of the Murray River in Victoria, it is *Gulpa Ngawal*. For the Gunai/Kurnai, who reside near Gippsland in Victoria, it is *Molla Wariga*.

The Indigenous concept of Deep Listening describes a way of learning, working, and togetherness that is informed by the concepts of community and reciprocity. Leadership underpinned by Deep Listening involves listening respectfully, which can help build community. It draws on every sense and every part of our being. Deep Listening in community leadership involves taking the time to develop relationships and to listen respectfully and responsibly. It also means listening to and observing oneself (Atkinson 2001).

The chapter has been structured around seven dimensions of leadership, all of which are interconnected, as part of a model of Deep Listening and Leadership:

1. **Leaders as Collaborators:** Deep Listening in Relationship
2. **Leaders as Learners:** Deep Listening in Research
3. **Leaders as Facilitators:** Deep Listening in Community
4. **Leaders as Artists:** Deep Listening to Culture
5. **Leaders as Storytellers:** Deep Listening to Wisdom
6. **Leaders as Custodians:** Deep Listening to Country
7. **Leaders as Messengers:** Deep Listening to the Future

### **The Deep Listening and Leadership Model**

The Deep Listening and Leadership Model has developed organically over ten years of experience within a project known as the Deep Listening Project. Linking Deep Listening and community leadership in this way foregrounds our interconnectedness and embeds leadership practice in relationships, respect, and reciprocity. The stories and insights gathered from project participants reveal how ancient Indigenous wisdom translates to leading-edge contemporary leadership practice. The examples of leadership practice included in this chapter have been drawn from the work of community leaders in Australia and Canada who participated in the Deep Listening Project.

The Deep Listening Project began at Australia's RMIT University in 2003 with a group of Indigenous researchers undertaking master's and PhD degrees. They were artists, musicians, educators, and community leaders. The initial group of researchers was called the Koori Cohort of Researchers. Over the years, the cohort expanded and corporate funding was secured to enable the project to extend its work in the public domain. This has included a range of Deep Listening events that were held at conferences, festivals, and exhibitions, as well as a cross-cultural exchange between community leaders in Australia and Canada.

The chapter begins with an introduction to the concept of Deep Listening.

## The Deep Listening and Leadership Model



### What is Deep Listening?

It was through the work of Aunty Miriam Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann, a Ngangikurungkurr elder from the Daly River in the Northern Territory in Australia, that the Koori Cohort of Researchers first heard about the concept of Deep Listening. Aunty Miriam describes it like this:

In our Aboriginal way, we learn to listen from our earliest days. We could not live good and useful lives unless we listened. This was the normal way for us to learn—not by asking questions. We learnt by watching and listening, waiting and then acting. Our people have passed on this way of listening for over 40,000 years.... (Brennan and Ungunmerr-Baumann 1989, 41)

Deep Listening is a concept that has much to teach us about effective community leadership. It is a process of becoming present

to ourselves, to each other, and to the environment. Leaders who are Deep Listeners invite community members and colleagues to be fully present to each other and identify what is happening and emerging in the moment. It involves getting out of the way in order to open up a space in which genuine contact can be made. That space is a place of possibility, where current and emerging needs can be expressed and explored.

The core tenets of Deep Listening in community leadership are:

- Respect underpins our relationships with each other and with the land.
- Time is invested in relationships and the building of trust.
- Our understanding of ways of knowing is broadened and deepened.
- Creativity is embedded into the way we learn.
- A quality of care infuses our relationships and our work with each other.

Community development theorists from the Western tradition, such as Otto Scharmer and Karl Weick, advocate listening practices that align closely with the Indigenous concept of Deep Listening. When we are present, we are available to tune into other people and to our context. Otto Scharmer (2007) refers to this as “presencing”—a term that blends *presence* and *sensing*. It involves opening a space in which genuine contact can be made. The paradox is that the more we are present, the more we are able to get out of the way and become available for other people. Further, Scharmer’s concept of Generative Listening aligns closely with Deep Listening. It invites community members and colleagues to be fully present to each other and identify what is happening and emerging in the moment.

Deep Listening in our leadership practice helps us pull out some threads and insights from the issues in which we feel caught. Organizational theorist Karl Weick’s (2006) work on collective mindfulness aligns closely with the principles of Deep Listening. It involves developing the capacity to seek a complete and nuanced picture of any difficult situation. Reflecting on issues from different perspectives requires a degree of comfort with complexity and

a reluctance to simplify. Community leaders who practise Deep Listening are aware of the complexities within a situation and the different perspectives from which one situation can be viewed.

The concept of respect is central to Deep Listening, and when applied to leadership practice it is about working with our commonalities and with our differences. Taking the time to invest in relationships is central to Deep Listening. The building of community is predicated on the development of mutual trust.

**Leaders as Collaborators: Deep Listening in Relationship**

Deep Listening

It is coming together, meeting to share our stories

Our connectedness to nature and each other

As part of the eternal cycle of life

(Couzens 2010)

My greatest teachers have been my students. Not long after my own doctoral completion, I was introduced to my first Indigenous doctoral student, Mark Rose. He was a community leader, a lecturer in the School of Management at RMIT University, and deeply committed to Indigenous education. The demands on Mark through his community service and his professional responsibilities were enormous. Over a period of eight years, his doctoral supervisors had not found a way of working with him that met his needs and where the listening and learning was a mutual exchange.

Mark was running out of time to complete his doctorate, and it looked as if he might not finish within the allotted time. Mark wanted the doctoral degree, recognizing its symbolic and practical power. He also wanted to contribute to the Indigenous community and be a role model for Indigenous youth. I felt enormous respect for his resilience and commitment.

When we were first introduced to each other, I had just completed an unusual PhD at RMIT's School of Management where I had explored multiple ways of knowing. A new wave of theory about issues of representation and an appreciation of voices that were marginalized (or muted) had informed my work. I knew I was on to something significant, but until I met Mark, I did not understand what it was. Mark and I were matched up as doctor-

al supervisor and candidate because the university wanted and needed him to succeed, but it had not been able to find a way to help him do so.

Mark told me stories of his Aboriginal father's abduction from the mission when he was eight years old, lured into the government car away from his family with a jar of lollipops. Meanwhile, his father, a deeply troubled man, spent his life passing as Spanish. Mark also told stories of his own long struggle to reclaim his identity and the process of making peace with his father. A deeply respected elder, Uncle Banjo Clarke, helped Mark with his unification with his Gunditjmara family in southwestern Victoria.

Mark and I found a way of working together that felt like a partnership while on a bridge that we could both cross. We bent and stretched and the trust between us grew. He taught me about the Indigenous Standpoint Theory of Professor Errol West (Japanangka), which reflected the multi-dimensional nature of experience through an integrated model of eight voices: cultural, spiritual, secular, intellectual, political, practical, personal, and public (Foley 2003). I shared with him the literature of multiple ways of knowing, narrative inquiry, and the theorization of creative forms of representation in research.

We struggled with questions of form and content while confronting some of the inherent absurdities of an educational system that is based on exclusion. We explored the ethical complexities and sensitivities of research. For example, "Who owns this knowledge? Who is it for? How might knowledge be shared and still protected? Who has the authority to determine this?" Together, we questioned the power relationships of the academic system and we challenged them.

Mark was successful and completed his doctoral degree. There was a big celebration on the night of his graduation. The senior elder, Auntie Joy Wandin Murphy, at his graduation ceremony, told me she could feel the ancestors very close and that they were dancing.

Word got around the Indigenous community of Mark's successful completion of his doctorate. Other Indigenous students heard that there was a way of doing research that made room for Indigenous voices and multiple ways of knowing. They wanted to

join the research program and pursue postgraduate studies. This was the beginning of the Koori Cohort of Researchers, a community of scholars that began at RMIT University and later expanded to Monash University (both in Melbourne, Australia).

The model of listening and learning with respect that Mark and I developed during our work together formed the bedrock out of which the Deep Listening Project emerged. Mark is now a full professor at La Trobe University in Victoria, Australia. He is a community leader in the field of Indigenous education, whose national and international influence is predicated on his capacity to listen deeply and cultivate that capacity in others. Mark has been a pioneer in breaking down some of the dysfunctional elements in the power structure within the academy, and he has found his own voice and his own liberation within it:

I seek liberations from many platforms. Liberation from the sanitised, jaundiced take on the invasion of this country, perpetuated to this day by successive education systems . . . My ancestral spirits have called me. I stand as a testimonial to their power, influence and wisdom. For I am a Blackfella. (Rose 2003)

If it were not for Mark Rose, the Koori Cohort of Researchers and the Deep Listening Project would never have been born.

### **Leaders as Learners: Deep Listening in Research**

Deep Listening has been a long tradition for thousands of generations of Aboriginal people in Australia. The immersing of all senses to observe, learn, create, share and grow throughout time is of vital importance to our cultural knowledge. Deep Listening opens up a space to think about inner experience. It means listening not only with our ears. It's deep listening with our eyes, deep listening with all the senses. (Trehna Hamm, email comm. with Kevin Argus)

On the day that Mark Rose handed in his PhD dissertation, he met a woman named Trehna Hamm at a public presentation he was giving. He told her how he had incorporated Indigenous ways of knowing into his research. Trehna contacted me the next

day to inquire about a similar program. I have always been drawn to artists, musicians, and researchers who work on the edge of their own becoming. To me, their work feels inspired, alive, and brave. Treahna is such a person. She is a highly regarded Indigenous artist who works in many media areas and who uses her art to facilitate cultural regeneration. Treahna played a significant role in establishing the Indigenous research student groups at both RMIT University and Monash University. Together, Treahna and I challenged the boundaries of knowledge within the university system.

Treahna was one of the first students in the Koori Cohort of Researchers to collaborate with jazz musicians who were interested in improvising with artworks and stories. She has been pivotal in developing the framework for the Deep Listening Project by facilitating research-based cultural regeneration, language revival, and cross-cultural exchange.

Treahna and I have now worked together in this way for many years. We have co-facilitated Deep Listening Circles in the community and have made joint presentations in many different contexts. We work together, both within and beyond the academic world, drawing on the knowledge we have gained from our collaborative work. We have also co-authored papers and book chapters. Some of Treahna's stories from our most recent collaborative publication are found below. Here she describes how Deep Listening has underpinned her research and her artwork, as well as our relationship:

My name is Treahna Hamm. I'm a Yorta Yorta woman. In my research and in my artwork I use the concept of Deep Listening as a way to bridge together my experiences creatively and culturally. In my PhD I looked at reconnecting with family through individual and community narratives.

When I first began my PhD, I met with Dr. Laura Brearley and I spoke about my connection to family, culture and land through my art. At the meeting, I highlighted the importance of the timing of my PhD and that it needed to be right culturally. I was determined to portray my connections using my own voice as an Indigenous woman. In previous study, my sense of identity had been diluted within the dominant discourse of mainstream study.



I felt a sense of urgency to gain knowledge and stories that were on the brink of extinction within the Victorian community. As I saw it, our old people were vitally important in saving cultural knowledge and continuing strong cultural links to our past. I could not put this aside. I hoped my study would affirm my deep connection to land, identity and community and to the stories of the Elders.

I felt that my PhD would give me the opportunity to save some of the Elders' stories within the community. Elders who attain and live their cultural knowledge and practices are integral to cultural survival. It is vital that their voices are heard in all realms of education, including the academic arena. We need to hear many voices in the space "in between." Healthy dialogue is the result. This space lies between Indigenous, European and multicultural communities where knowledge, culture and respect can merge and where understanding can be deepened.

Early on in my PhD, I remember showing Laura a series of my mother's maternal line which depicted six generations of women. This was Laura's introduction to the members of my family who had shaped my Indigenous identity. It was important for me to share these inter-generational stories with Laura at the very beginning of my PhD.

To undertake my research, I adopted the Indigenous principle of Deep Listening "Dadirri." Gulpa Ngawal is the Yorta Yorta equivalent. The experience of my research has given me the ability to explore my role in life as an Indigenous woman. Through the artworks I made in my PhD research, I wanted to regenerate culture. I learned from the Elders and from myself. My aim for my PhD was to experience cultural growth and development. This was indeed my experience.

The bond that Laura and I shared created a system of connection with community. The Koori Cohort created something new in a University system, a safe space in which to learn, create and write. It was not only about an individual narrative but a community narrative with the Koori Cohort of Researchers.

Laura and I worked as equals with no subordination in our role as student and supervisor. Through our conversations, both University requirements and Aboriginal responsibilities could

be intertwined. There was a depth of understanding, mutual respect and a support for each other in our roles. It was a successful partnership which led to the establishment of a strong group able to express themselves at local, national and international events. (Brearley and Hamm 2013)

Emerging from our own work, Treaahna and I identified some principles and practices for working effectively in a cross-cultural context. We developed and applied a framework of practice that was trans-disciplinary and culturally situated, and integrated the principles of Deep Listening. Its purpose has been to:

- incorporate Indigenous ways of knowing into research projects;
- provide a developmental infrastructure for staff and candidates that facilitates ways of working between Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge systems in a creative research context;
- create a cross-institutional community of staff, candidates, and members of the Indigenous community interested in research; and
- support the development of Indigenous researchers.

The five key aspects of our research model that may be helpful for others in a similar context are:

1. **Facilitate Mutual Exchange:** This is achieved by framing the relationship between the supervisor and the candidate as a collaboration. You must determine what you have to share as the foundational structure of the doctoral work. The candidate and the supervisor must invite each other into their cultural and creative worlds to share songs, stories, images, and poetry that are related to the conversation.
2. **Value Whole Life Experience:** There must be a recognition of the value of creative and cultural lived experience that Indigenous candidates bring to the academic world. The Indigenous candidates' cultural practices, the richness of their knowledge base, and the significance of the research they are undertaking must be appreciated and valued by the academy.

**3. Create Multi-Layered Systems of Support:** A community must be fostered where Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and staff who are interested in exploring innovative approaches meet to advance research. These meetings should occur regularly in both formal and informal settings. Systems of collaborative support, including advocates, should be developed within the larger system. A strong group must be created that has a collective voice that cannot be ignored and that can prove itself deserving of respect and systemic support.

**4. Work Between Knowledge Systems:** One must be open to naming and questioning the assumptions held about different forms of knowledge. There should be a willingness to explore what is meant by concepts such as scholarship, creativity, and research. Approaches to assessment and research methods that examine the underpinning principles, criteria, and language have to be advanced.

**5. Develop Collaborative Frameworks of Learning:** Systems of support that encompass collaborative frameworks of learning and partnership models of scholarship need to be initiated, promoting opportunities across disciplines and cultures for ongoing dialogue with people who are genuinely excited about each other's work. There must be a willingness to question and move beyond the systemic power relationships endorsed by the current university structure. (Brearley and Hamm 2013)

The key to the kind of work that Treaahna and I have undertaken is the building of a collaborative relationship underpinned by Deep Listening—at the heart of which is mutual respect and trust.

**Leaders as Facilitators: Deep Listening in Community**

Deep Listening

Blackfellas have been doing it for hundreds and hundreds  
of generations

Deep Listening is what we are doing here

Just listening to each other

Listening to the country

Listening to each other

And understanding each other's journey.

(Clarke 2009)

After Treaahna completed her doctoral studies, we continued to co-facilitate Deep Listening events within the community. One of these events was a cross-cultural Deep Listening Circle held in Melbourne in 2012. It was hosted by a collective of African storytelling women now living in Australia. In this Circle, we facilitated a ritual that explored our interconnections. The ritual generated a number of messages from the participants that was distilled into poetic form:

Everything lies within the Circle  
All connected

Stand up, speak up  
Make contact

Making space for doubt  
And yet still connecting

Acting as if  
There were no boundaries between us

Sharing cultures  
Looking through the eyes of others

Seeing ourselves reflected there  
Interdependent

I see you  
I know you in me

The following week, Treaahna and I facilitated another cross-cultural Deep Listening Circle in Melbourne to bless a warehouse that was being dedicated as an Aboriginal Arts Hub. At this Deep Listening Circle, participants were invited to write messages about what community meant to them. Participants tied their messages onto a large 2.6-metre diameter wooden circle that had been prepared by Swinburne University design students. The circle was then rolled through the streets of Melbourne to the warehouse. The messages included:

We are all connected

Community is a net

Community is belonging

Community is a place to be

Community is people of all ages

Community is all families, all cultures

Community is storytelling, connecting, listening, healing

Community is inviting new stories of new members

Community is mutual memories

Community is people getting together and making things happen

Community is inclusion

Community is trust

Community is being able to be ourselves

Community is embracing ourselves through each other

Both African and Chinese cultures were strongly represented in these Deep Listening Circles. The research we have undertaken indicates that both of these cultures share traditions closely related to Indigenous Deep Listening.

From the African tradition, researcher Jon Roar Bjørkvold (1992) describes a Swahili word, *Sikia*, which in a way resonates with the concept of Deep Listening. He translates it as “integrated sensing.” *Sikia* refers to a single complex experience in which one simultaneously sees and hears, pays attention to, notices, understands, and perceives. He argues that it is a Western construct to encourage specialization and the division of sensation into collections of isolated skills that can then be mapped and studied one by one rather than as a collective. African thought, he claims, makes no clear-cut distinction between subject and object, mind and body, or self and world. In the African paradigm, life-force, sound, and word are identical.

According to the Taoist Chinese Buddhist tradition, the concept of Deep Listening can be represented by the Chinese characters for Listen and Respect. These characters incorporate the ideas of

Heaven, People, Earth, Ear, Eye, Heart, Respect, Authority, Ten, One, and the relationships between all of them.

Traditional Chinese characters have been passed down through the ages and each character has a story with multiple layers of meaning. The story in each character only reveals itself if you are looking for it, and there are many interpretations to each story. According to the Tao, the layers of meaning in this combination of characters that represent Deep Listening involve:

Knowing our position in relation to Heaven and Earth  
Listening in the context of surroundings—Land, People,  
Heaven and Earth  
Oneness of mind and heart

Being connected to all things  
Relationality to the Land  
Understanding relationality

Giving your undivided attention  
Giving yourself wholeheartedly  
Involving total dedication

Jing      Ting  
Respect Listen  
敬      聽      (Ching Tan and William Wu, pers. comm.)

The ongoing exchange of stories, messages, and shared experiences with our Canadian friends continues to inform and enrich us. We have explored the concept of Deep Listening in both Australia and Canada with respected community leaders Bob and Audrey Breaker. Bob Breaker, a former Siksika Nation chief, shared with us that in his Blackfoot language and culture the concept of Deep Listening also existed. In his tradition, there are different layers of Deep Listening:

*Istsiwakakkit*: Listen to me  
*Sopoyaapistsiyiita*: Listen carefully  
*Niitaapsopoyaapistsiyiita*: Really listen carefully

He described a fourth even deeper layer, which involved listening to those who have passed on. Access to this level of Deep Listening brings guidance with it as well as enormous responsibility.

Audrey Breaker described a related Cree concept of *Meyopimatsiwin*, “living in harmony,” and a Blackfoot concept *Mokakoyis*, “dwelling in wisdom” (Audrey Breaker and Bob Breaker, pers. comm.). The concepts reveal the links between language, land, knowledge, and how to live.

Treahna has also undertaken research with linguists with expertise in the Sanskrit and Dravidian languages, such as Tamil, Malayalam, and Telegu. She has been told of three words that relate to her understanding of Deep Listening:

*Manna sakshee*: Witness of your heart

*Oolmanathu*: Inner heart

*Nal mannam ode kathukarathu*: Learning with good heart

(Treahna Hamm, pers. comm. with Kevin Argus)

Through these cross-cultural connections and her own deep links to culture, Treahna recognizes the ways in which we are all connected:

By connecting to our stories

We are stabilised

If we are disconnected

We are cut off from love and life

We need to value our shared humanity

Before any real connection can begin

We look up at the sky and we see the clouds

We see the blue gaps in between

The gaps matter

They link the clouds together

The shapes we see in the clouds may differ

But the sky and the clouds connect us all

(Hamm 2009)

A key skill in fostering a sense of connection and interconnect-  
edness in community is the capacity to listen deeply, especially to  
what lies in the spaces in between.

**Leaders as Artists: Deep Listening to Culture**

Deep Listening—it's feeling the words

Feeling the pictures

Feeling the conversations

Particularly as I get older

I learn to trust my intuition and instincts

I feel—and that's my guide

(Weightman 2009)

Artists and musicians in the Deep Listening Project interweave  
songs, stories, and multimedia in ways that celebrate and regener-  
ate Indigenous culture. Within the Project, Indigenous and non-  
Indigenous artists, musicians, and researchers come together in  
different configurations to improvise, record, and perform in dif-  
ferent community contexts.

In 2011, the Project facilitated a Deep Listening Stream at a  
conference for Indigenous community leaders called the Deadly  
in Gippsland (DIG), held in regional Victoria, Australia. The pur-  
pose of the Deep Listening Stream was to provide a space to fa-  
cilitate connections, reflections, and creative responses on the  
conference themes:

- Sustainable Futures
- Working Together
- Health and Well-Being

The Stream provided an alternative space to enrich the explora-  
tion of the conference themes through creative ways of engaging  
with people and ideas.

The Deep Listening Stream included performances and impro-  
visations by the Deep Listening Band, a songwriting workshop,  
and the performance of an “end of conference song” written by  
conference delegates. The conference was subsequently awarded a



National Local Government Award for promoting reconciliation through Deep Listening in Action.

At the conference, a Deep Listening Room was created to provide an alternative space for people to meet, share stories, and explore the conference themes. In the Deep Listening Room, mandalas of fabric, natural objects, and quotes served as focal points (like campfires) for ongoing Deep Listening Circles. Tables of arts and crafts materials and natural objects were provided for participants to create a contribution to the conversation. An artist-in-residence explored the interface between art, music, and cultural knowledge, and responded to the content of conference presentations through his artwork.

As part of the Deep Listening Stream, a distillation of key ideas from workshops, accompanied by photos of activities from the conference, was presented to conference delegates on day two of the conference. What emerged was a collective snapshot of what the current issues were and what community leaders were committed to.

We are committed to ...

Getting connected

Building community confidence

Embracing an Aboriginal perspective

Promoting Aboriginal culture

Keeping kids off the street

Stopping men from going into prison

Getting beyond being reactive

Talking about problems

Breaking the cycle of disadvantage

Educating, engaging

Helping steer the future in a positive way

Working in a framework of respect, culture, empowerment

Acknowledging the possibilities of change in people  
Prisoners gaining skills, building better lives

Men standing up to say no to violence  
Helping women perpetrators get their lives back

Learning from, learning with  
Discovering purpose in life

Being patient and flexible  
Listening deeply (DIG Conference 2012)

The artists and musicians in the Deep Listening Stream of the conference were able to distill and creatively reflect back to the community what its leaders were working towards. The shared recognition of the collective strength of the community and its strong links to culture was best expressed in the lyrics of the collective song that was written and performed at the conference by participants led by Monica Weightman, a Murri song woman.

### **Dooyedang: The Deadly in Gippsland Song**

1. Uncle Albert—can you tell us Timeless stories of this land?  
Uncle Albert—he did tell us Take the watch from our hands  
Enter the smoke Bathe in the love of our ancestors  
Cleanse your spirit

*Chorus:* Dooyedang Carry us home  
Singing and dancing Your songs  
Dooyedang Please make us strong  
Singing your songs The Dooyedang  
Deadly in Gippsland / Dooyedang (*repeat*)

2. Booran and Tuk, the pelican, musk duck  
And the dancing of Djeetgun and Yeering  
Nuntim on Dooyedang  
To the wetlands we come  
Dancing in the stories  
Of the old ones

*Repeat Chorus*

The collectively created song seamlessly wove together commitment to culture, language regeneration, respect for elders, and the land. The creative process of composing and performing it and having it witnessed by the community reflected the strength and power of leaders as artists.

**Leaders as Storytellers: Deep Listening to Wisdom**

Deep Listening happens on many levels

It's about walking on the land

Softly quietly

And listening to the stories around the campfire

Listening to the Elders

Listening to the teachers

Respect for Elders and respect for all people

And giving everyone the time

Deep Listening is about not judging people too quickly

We've got to listen to the wind in the trees

Listen to the birds

It's the feeling of a gift—a gift always comes back

(Murray 2009)

In 2008, members of the Koori Cohort of Researchers visited The Banff Centre in Alberta to perform and present at the Art of Management Conference. This was the beginning of the Creative Cross-Cultural Exchange within the Deep Listening Project, bringing together people from both sides of the Pacific to engage in Deep Listening events.

In Banff, we had the privilege of meeting Elder Tom Crane Bear, Brian Calliou, Don McIntyre, and other staff and friends of the Indigenous Leadership and Management Program at The Banff Centre. We were welcomed into The Banff Centre tipi for smoking ceremonies and we were also invited to a powwow at the nearby Morley First Nation. In Banff, we shared many stories, and thus created opportunities for collaboration. These events built relationships and generated creative forms that transcended the boundaries of disciplines, genres, and cultures.

Following this, a group of artists, researchers, and community leaders from the Indigenous Leadership and Management Program were invited to Australia. Their visit included participation in the World Indigenous People's Conference in Education that took place in Melbourne in 2008. A joint exhibition of artworks from the Creative Cross-Cultural Exchange was held at the Koorie Heritage Trust, and a collaborative CD of songs and stories was recorded at the RMIT studios.

The Canadian visitors were invited into our homes and important connections with local elders were made, including a sacred naming ceremony where Elder Tom Crane Bear (senior Siksika elder) presented Uncle Albert Mullett (senior Gunnai elder) with his grandfather's name. The Deep Listening Community had built international, intergenerational, and interdisciplinary relationships and had become a family. The exchange of stories and ideas between Canada and Australia within the Deep Listening Project has been ongoing since that time.

The storytelling medium has been documented in a number of ways. For example, a film crew has been following the Cross-Cultural Exchange since it began, and it continues to make short films documenting the collaboration and the stories that are shared. Our filmmaker, Kimba Thompson, who completed her Master of Arts in storytelling and multimedia in 2010, says this about stories:

Storytelling is crucial to our individual, communal, and cultural identity. Story is learning, celebrating, healing, and remembering. It can mark a life, enrich individual emotional and cultural development, and assist in making sense of our world. (Thompson 2010)

Ron Murray is a Wamba Wamba man who has been a member of the Deep Listening Community since its inception. He is a storyteller, didgeridoo player, wood sculptor, and community leader. In 2010, he completed a Master of Arts in which storytelling practice was a central feature. This is what he says about the importance of storytelling:

Lake Boga is my traditional area and my totem is the red-tail black cockatoo. I find it easy to tell stories. It's important to keep the art of storytelling alive. In my work, I aim to foster a sense of pride in Aboriginal people and to develop a sense of understanding and recognition of our history. I'm not really doing a lot of things differently from the old people. They would have taught the same. They would have talked about the environment, the family and important people.

Stories are powerful things. If you look at our old storytellers, they were our educators. They made the links with the past. They sat around camp fires, and told stories. If you listen to the creation story of my mother's people, it goes for an hour and a half, and the more I listen to it, the more lessons I hear in it. There can be thousands of layers to a story.

I hope that my work makes a contribution to increasing an understanding of our community and what living a good life might mean. What I am trying to achieve in my work is to have people, both black and white, feeling proud of Aboriginal people. (Murray 2010)

In her artwork and filmmaking practice, Kimba works collaboratively with communities, using stories and new media to interpret, express, and celebrate culture. She recognizes the links between storytelling and healing. In her research, she writes,

It is very important for Indigenous people to tell their stories. Our people have many scars. The scars are layered like in a scar tree. The scars are emotional, physical and even traditional. Stories open wounds that allow the process of the healing to begin. They celebrate our being, identity, culture and land. (Thompson 2010)

Elder Tom Crane Bear has also been very generous with sharing his knowledge through stories. Elder Tom is a teacher and spiritual leader from the Siksika Nation in Canada. He is a pipe carrier and has been inducted into the Spiritual Indigenous Elders Circle of the World. Elder Tom has been to Australia twice as part of the Deep Listening Project's Cross-Cultural Exchange. Both times, we have invited Elder Tom into the studio to record stories and

songs. On his most recent visit, he spoke about the importance of storytelling:

Our culture begins with storytelling  
Stories can teach you

Storytelling used to happen in the early evening  
All of us children, we never made a sound

Me, my brother and my young cousin  
We were raised by our grandmother

We'd go to bed early just as the sun went down  
She'd say "Don't make a noise"

She would cover the windows  
We had beds in the house but we didn't sleep on them

We never used the beds  
That was the European way

We'd sleep on the floor in the corner  
In a nice bed made out for you

The children would listen to the stories  
It was part of our culture

We were taught the meanings of things  
We would talk our language

The Elders would talk about days gone by  
How things were run

It was a clan system  
So many clans living out on the prairies

They would sleep out there  
Camping together with all their relations

At a certain time of the year  
They would gather together

They would make a plan  
Of what they should do for the summer

Some of them would go berry picking  
The young people would go hunting on horseback

Our Elders taught us about the past  
This is how we learned

I look back to the days of my grandmother  
Like all the people from the plains, she could ride horses

She was one of the women who signed the Treaty in 1877  
As I grew older, I began to understand the stories she told me

Sometimes, we get into trouble  
We think “Oh never mind those stories, I’ll make my own trail”  
If we listen carefully to the Elders, Deep Listening  
We can work out that they were right

Stories are our culture  
They develop you into a good man or a good woman.  
(Crane Bear 2012)

Community leaders such as Ron Murray, Kimba Thompson, and Elder Tom Crane Bear recognize the value of storytelling in supporting the development of good men and women as well as in sharing wisdom. Whether telling contemporary stories through new media or sharing traditional stories around a fire, the storytellers in the Deep Listening Community recognize the crucial role stories play in guiding us and teaching us how to listen. If we listen deeply enough, stories can transform and heal us. This rich source of knowledge is a well from which leaders can draw, enabling them to pass on wisdom to future generations.

### **Leaders as Custodians: Deep Listening to Country**

Country for us is also centrally about identity. Our lands, our seas underpin who we are. Where we come from. Who our ancestors are. What it means to be from that place from that country. How others see and view us. How others identify us. How we feel about each other. How we feel about our families and ourselves. Country to us is fundamentally about our survival as peoples. (Dodson 2007)

The Australian Indigenous concept of *country* is not just about the land, the sea, and the sky. It includes all living things and the stories, songs, dances, and responsibilities that go with sustaining an environment in which everything is interconnected. The cultural regeneration and creative language revival work within the Deep Listening Project reflect the seamless links between country, culture, language, identity, song, story, and dance. This strength-based regeneration work is taking place not only in the Deep Listening Project but also in many Indigenous communities in Australia and around the world. Through organizations such as the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages (VACL), language revival processes are now incorporating songs, stories, poetry, theatre, and the visual arts. Indigenous researchers, community members, linguists, and artists are working collaboratively to undertake language revival processes, creating and disseminating resources, soundscapes, and art forms.

Rather than approaching the reclamation process from the deficit model of lost community memory and limited historical records, a descriptive approach to linguistics is now emerging that involves collaborative work between elders, linguists, and community members to develop new models of Indigenous “languages-in-progress.”

Vicki Couzens is a high-profile Aboriginal artist and a leader in the field of creative regeneration and language revival. She completed her Master of Arts degree in 2010 and is now undertaking a PhD in this field. Vicki has been a key player in the revival of possum skin cloak making and has worked with many community members to pass on this art form. She has participated in many Deep Listening events and projects, including live performances, the ABC radio program *Listening to Country*, and an audio CD, *On Country*. On this CD, Vicki demonstrates the strength of her leadership qualities and her understanding of what it means to be a custodian of Country. She says:

Strong People, Strong Culture, Strong Country

In speaking our language we awaken the Spirit

The Land resonates in response

In our dancing, in our songs and our stories



We make ourselves stronger and then the Land is strengthened  
When the Land is strong, so are the People

Language, story, song and dance resonate with Country and place  
The voice of the Land is heard in our language and songs

Our stories are the body of the Land  
The rhythm and heartbeat of the Land is felt in the dance

In revitalising language and culture  
We gain a sense of peace and strength in knowing who  
we are and where we belong

As Aboriginal people, identity and belonging  
Are central to who we are and to our well-being

Our culture is the context through which we relate to  
the environment  
Each other and to the world

Language revival involves exploring unseen, intangible things  
Our spiritual connection to Country and the notion  
of belonging and place

The links between song and dance, words and intonation,  
resonance and vibration  
The connectedness of Spirit to the Land

The Dreaming from which we all came to Be

(Couzens 2011)

When there was a successful National Native Title<sup>1</sup> decision made in favour of the traditional owners of Gunditjmarra country in 2007, Vicki Couzens was chosen by the community to do the Acknowledgement of Country at the beginning of the ceremony. The following is an excerpt from her Acknowledgement:

*Teen ngeeye Meerreeng*  
Here is our Country

*Ngeeye Meerreeng peeneeyt teenay*  
Our Country is strong here

*Laka Meerreeng*  
Talk the Country

*Leerpeen Meerreeng*  
Sing the Country

*Karweeyn Meerreeng*  
Dance the Country

*Karman kanoo Meerreeng*  
Paint up the Country

*Yana poorrpa Meerreeng*  
Travel through the Country

*Mayapa Meerreeng peeneeyt*  
Make the Country strong

*Mayapa maar peeneeyt*  
Make the people strong (Couzens 2007)

Vicki Couzens has undertaken linguistic work at the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages (VACL), an organization that shows strong leadership in the field of cultural and linguistic regeneration. Like Vicki, Paul Paton is a significant community leader and is the executive officer of the VACL. On the Deep Listening CD *On Country*, Paul recorded the following message that reveals his understanding of the interconnectedness of language with Country and culture. He said:

Language is your identity  
It tells you who you are

Your place in the world  
The rules to live your life by

It tells you  
About the seasons

When to gather your food  
How to listen

It tells you your stories  
Of kinship and community

Language needs a place to live  
It lives in daily use

As soon as you say one word  
You've moved into a different culture

Reviving language helps people  
Reclaim who they are

Language is culture  
Culture is everything

(Paton 2011)

From the other side of the Pacific Ocean, Elder Tom Crane Bear also has messages about the importance of our role as custodians of the land. Here are some ideas he shared about the importance of caring for the land and our interconnectedness with it. I have represented his words in poetic text:

A lot of people don't realize how important the land is  
We all come from the land  
Water sustains our lives  
The animals and the fish  
So much of our body is fluid

It's important that we look after the ecosystem  
The undergrowth of the forest  
Everything is connected and doing its work  
If the system breaks we all get sick

The trees purify the air that we breathe  
The rocks purify the water that we drink  
The trees drink that water  
And give us branches and leaves

People see money in the forest  
So they cut the trees down

It used to be so pretty going through British Columbia  
to Vancouver  
Now we see bare spots on the mountain  
They will be dirt one day  
We have to watch out  
In 1945 an old man told my Dad  
The white man has dropped a bomb  
The explosion has been so powerful  
It has made a hole in the seven blankets that cover the earth  
Since then the hole in the seven blankets has got bigger

Summer is different now  
We have longer summers and shorter winters  
The ice will melt and disease will come  
We are not looking after the planet well enough  
A little baby crying is sending a message to you  
But it's up to you to understand the message  
You have to be alert to try and understand what that baby needs  
All humans have a message for each other

The Earth is sending a message too  
We know about the Creator who made everything  
The planets and the sun  
Everything is holy (Elder Tom Crane Bear, pers. comm.)

More leaders who listen to the messages the Earth is sending and who are willing to take responsibility as custodians of Country in its deepest sense are needed.

### **Leaders as Messengers: Deep Listening to the Future**

Deep Listening is about hearing the sounds that haven't been made yet. (McIntyre 2012)

The international cross-cultural exchange of messages continues in the Deep Listening Project through ongoing visits, dialogue, and Deep Listening events. As part of the Project, we facilitated a Shearwater Festival on Phillip Island in Victoria, Australia, to celebrate the return of the short-tailed shearwater birds on their

migration from the North Pacific in November 2012. One million short-tailed shearwaters live on Phillip Island, and five hundred thousand of them have their rookeries at Cape Woolamai, part of the Phillip Island Nature Park. It is an experience of wonder, watching them return to land as the sky becomes black with birds.

The shearwaters are messengers about the health of our oceans. If there is a drop in the numbers of krill on which they feed in the North Pacific Ocean, the numbers of birds that make it back to Australia drops significantly. Two years ago, there was a “crash” in the krill stock and a million dead shearwaters were washed up on Australian shores due to insufficient fuel in their systems to make it home safely. These birds have deep cultural significance for the local Boonwurrung people, having brought the community together for thousands of years for feasts, gatherings, and ceremonies. The birds migrate fifteen thousand kilometres each year, flying from Australia up the west coast of Canada to the Bering Sea off Alaska. In one year they can fly up to fifty thousand kilometres, and in a lifetime they can fly farther than from here to the moon.

The Shearwater Festival honours the birds for their cultural significance and their resilience and as symbols of global interconnectedness. The Festival is held under the auspices of the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages and adheres to the principles of Deep Listening. It is designed to bring the community together to promote cross-cultural understanding, cultural regeneration, and environmental awareness.

Boonwurrung linguists have worked with Aboriginal community members, local artists, photographers, poets, musicians, and schoolchildren to introduce creative language revival practices into the Festival. The Festival includes art displays, concerts, environmental talks, and guided walks to see the shearwaters taking off from and returning to the rookeries at Cape Woolamai. With The Banff Centre’s support, Elder Tom Crane Bear, Brian Calliou, and Don McIntyre flew to Australia in 2012 to participate in the inaugural Shearwater Festival and the two-week Creative Cross-Cultural Exchange that accompanied it.

An International Message Exchange between schoolchildren and artists along the birds’ flight path began in 2012. France

Trepanier, a high-profile Mohawk/Québécoise artist and researcher, has been participating in the exchange between schoolchildren on Phillip Island and on Vancouver Island, where she lives. France has received and passed into safe hands a message written by a nine-year-old girl on Phillip Island. The message was tied with a ribbon around the neck of a small knitted shearwater bird that was made by an artist from the Country Women's Association on Phillip Island and hand-delivered to France. The message read:

To Children in Alaska

Please look after the shearwaters and look after  
our oceans for the shearwaters.  
Take good care of them and give them love.  
Make sure they come home safely.

Other children on the Island have also sent messages to children in Alaska, talking about the birds. These were hand-delivered to teachers in Alaska by the education ranger at the Phillip Island Nature Park, Graeme Burgan, at a Marine Educators Conference in Anchorage.

As part of the message exchange taking place between Australia and Canada, France Trepanier and I have recorded and distilled our conversations. We have noticed a shift in our communities towards an expanded awareness of shared concerns that transcend national borders. The experience of dispossession and the inter-linked environmental, political, socio-cultural, and economic crises now have global implications.

How do our histories connect us?

We breathe the same air  
We drink the same water

Shifting our notion of the Land  
To one based on Respect  
Is like learning to speak a new language

Exploitation brings wealth  
And wealth brings security  
The system functions on that formula

There's another wheel of fear  
Fear is a powerful tool used against the people  
The wheels go round and round

It's a false equation  
We have to unhook these things  
And stop making people afraid

If we engage in that framework  
We are stuck in a dichotomy of opposites and arguing against  
We need to look at the epistemology of the conversation

Art has a way of doing this  
Interconnectedness is complex  
Art helps take the complex and make it understandable

The conversations we need to be having are about  
Sustainability and security  
Shared connections

Identifying what matters  
In the rich soil of convergence  
And interconnectedness

This is how our histories  
And our futures  
Connect us all

(France Trepanier, pers. comm.)

Over the course of the Cross-Cultural Exchange, Don (AhnAhsisi) McIntyre, an Ojibwa storyteller, researcher, lawyer, and artist, has gifted us with messages and stories from his tradition. He speaks engagingly about the challenges we face and the process of transforming ourselves through the course of our lives. Here are some of Don's ideas that I have distilled from conversations we had during an artist's residency he undertook at The Banff Centre:

The smoke of the fire dances in spirals  
That's how life works  
Things need to change  
They must

We start as blank canvases  
And transform along the way  
If we're stuck  
We need to move forward

Moth is the transformer  
The dark transformer  
The Moth Medicine is helping us all to move through

We are at our most present in crisis  
There is a point where it stops being about us  
All Medicines have positive and negative aspects  
The Moth and the Butterfly, the Raven and the Eagle  
They all have the potential to transform

In the Shadowlands  
There are no secrets  
Time and space don't work in the same way  
Everything plays back into the spiral

Our work here is connected to a much larger project  
We are all part of it  
Our community includes the Creator  
We are in the protective arms of the Creator

(Don McIntyre, pers. comm.)

Elder Tom Crane Bear, France Trepanier, and Don McIntyre all pass on messages that reveal the qualities of care, generosity, and responsibility that are the hallmarks of community leadership. As Elder Tom puts it, "This is our work."

I learned from the Elders  
They taught me there are four things we have to practise  
Honesty, Trust, Love, and Kindness  
For each other and for the land too  
This is what the Creator wants you to see

We are created in order to be available to other human beings  
To share our wisdom  
To guide young people through life  
This is our work. (Elder Tom Crane Bear, pers. comm.)



## Conclusion

Brian Calliou, program director of Indigenous Leadership and Management at The Banff Centre, recognizes the leadership qualities of members of the Koori Cohort of Researchers. In conversation with Kimba Thompson in the *Gulpa Ngawal* film, he said:

I've noticed with the Koori Cohort what strong community leaders they are, leading revitalization of culture, collecting stories, and bringing them back to life, recovering them, finding them in archives or learning them from the Elders, recording them, re-interpreting them, and bringing them back to life.

I think this Deep Listening Project and the processes and the magic that is coming out can really inform the big world out there. There's the leadership, management, and organizational design community out there that is hungry for these new cutting-edge processes. (Calliou 2009)

The sense of interconnectedness we experience in the Deep Listening Project is a source of strength that sustains our leadership and creative practice. Deep Listening provides a framework for passing on learning, supporting the development of new leaders, and creating sustainable communities. In Margaret Wheatley's (2006) words, frameworks of this kind enable people to learn from each other, find support, create solutions, and discover new capabilities from a web of relationships.

The issues we face today are too complex and multi-layered for an individual leader to solve, no matter how charismatic or skilled he or she may be. We need each other. We need leaders as Collaborators, Learners, Facilitators, Artists, Storytellers, Custodians, and Messengers who listen deeply to the wisdom of the past, are fully present in the moment, and are awake to the emerging future.

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### Notes

1. The Federal Court of Australia made a consent determination on March 30, 2007, recognising the Gunditjmara Traditional Owners non-exclusive native title rights and interests over the majority of almost 140,000 hectares of vacant Crown land, national parks, reserves, rivers, creeks and sea north-west of Warrnambool in Victoria's western district (Ngootyoong Gunditj, Ngootyoong Mara 2012).

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### Further Information on the Deep Listening Project

- Website: <http://www.deeplisting21.com.au>
- Short film about Deep Listening in Action at the Deadly in Gippsland Conference: <http://vimeo.com/36995984>
- Short film about the Shearwater Project: <https://vimeo.com/58521654>
- Short film about rolling circle through Melbourne for Deep Listening Circle: <http://youtu.be/dwSoNtr7gE>
- More information about the Indigenous Deep Listening Project at RMIT University: <http://rmit.net.au/browse;ID=vldmuvmeiysgz>
- Music of the Deep Listening Band and interviews with Vicki Couzens, Lou Bennett, and Aunty Doris Paton are featured in a program "Listening to Country" on ABC Radio National's *Awaye*. <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/awaye/saturday-11-february-2012/3816462>

The Deep Listening Band has produced two CDs: *Gulpa Ngawal: Indigenous Deep Listening*, 2009; and *On Country: Songs, Stories and Soundscapes with the Deep Listening Band*, 2011. The *Gulpa Ngawal* CD features the creative cross-cultural exchange with Indigenous musicians and elders in Canada; it can be heard at <http://www.rmit.edu.au/browse;ID=erudytqwirao>. The CD *On Country* features living examples of creative language revival and cultural regeneration.

