Article

"Making Sure the Path Is Safe": A Case Study of the Influence of Aboriginal Elders on Non-Aboriginal Organisational Leadership

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Abstract: The question of how Aboriginal Elders influence the leadership of non-Aboriginal led service organisations when working *biddiya* to *biddiya* (boss to boss) emerged while conducting a qualitative analysis as part of the evaluation of the Looking Forward Moving Forward project. This project brought together non-Aboriginal service leaders, Aboriginal Elders and Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal researchers to implement and evaluate a framework for engagement to promote organisational change and transform the way in which services respond to Aboriginal people in need of mental health and drug and alcohol support in Perth, Western Australia. This paper uses a case study to demonstrate how Elders on *Nyoongar* Country have influenced one non-Aboriginal service leader. At the heart of this case study is a close examination of a recorded, semi-structured, in-depth focus group exchange between a non-Aboriginal leader, Elders and co-researchers. This exchange foregrounds the Elders' and co-researchers' voices, capturing the dialogic nuances and interplay of the interaction to provide a more detailed picture of how building long-term relationships with Elders influences leaders. A key theme to emerge from the data was the developmental change in leadership approaches resulting from the *biddiya* to *biddiya* working relationship between Elders and this non-Aboriginal leader. The data show that, along with their deepening relationship, the leader demonstrated an openness and humility to be teachable. This leader demonstrated how he applied his new learning, integrating new ways of working into his leadership practice to change the way his organisation responded to Aboriginal people seeking support and to enhance the organisation's cultural safety.

Keywords: Aboriginal; leadership; Elders; organisational change; social and emotional well-being; relationships; relational methodology; yarning

1. Introduction

> *Biddi* is actually a path and *biddiya* is someone who leads down that path. So, if you're starting off, *biddi* is the path that you're going to walk on, and the leader watches the *biddi* and makes sure that path is safe that you're going to walk on. So, making sure there's no obstacles or anything like that. So, they're protecting whoever is following. So, that's what we're doing. So, they call us *biddiyas*: we're doing things now for people to come (Elder co-researcher, 2021).

Aboriginal[1] Elders in Australia are uncompromising in their leadership approach, which is manifested in their connection to ancestors, connection to family and kin, and continuous cultural practices on Country and within their communities. In Perth, Western Australia, a group of *Nyoongar* Elders living on *Nyoongar Boodja* (Country) agreed to

participate as co-researchers on several participatory action research projects with the Looking Forward Moving Forward (LFMF) Project team (see Debakarn 2024). Spanning over a decade, LFMF and the Elders have worked to drive the priorities and needs of their families and communities living with alcohol and drug and/or mental health challenges. Conducting research in a more participatory and relational way demands a high level of authenticity, vulnerability, trust and reciprocity. Accordingly, the LFMF project is informed by the Elders' *debakarn koorliny wangkiny* approach—steady walking, talking (Wright et al. 2023). This kind of research journey enables relationships to build and grow, with trust and cultural safety paramount from the outset.

The Elders made one specific stipulation about their involvement with the projects as co-researchers: that they must work with the *biddiyas*—the *Nyoongar* word for bosses—of the mainstream services who were partners in the projects. The Elder's quotation at the outset of this paper explains the term *biddiya* and its meaning and intention. What sets the Elders apart in this work is their capacity to provide guidance and leadership as outsiders to the organisations. This is very different from trying to wield influence from within, which can be both frustrating and limiting, as is often the experience of First Nations employees[2].

Aboriginal people have always maintained their connection to culture, Country and kin, despite the ravages of colonisation. In part, this has been due to the collective leadership, knowledge and steadfast guidance of Elders within their respective communities in Australia and worldwide. While this form of leadership is not well understood by non-Aboriginal people, nor acknowledged or valued as a way of leading, there are signs that this may be changing.

There is now a burgeoning discussion in the literature about Aboriginal leadership within the mainstream as well as Aboriginal-controlled organisations. This is sometimes referred to as "two-ways" leadership (Frawley and Fasoli 2012; Stewart and Warn 2017), servant leadership (Canavesi and Minelli 2022), relational leadership (Doyle and Hungerford 2015; Fast and Kovach 2019; Haar et al. 2019; Wright et al. 2021b), transformational leadership (Harfield et al. 2021) and activist leadership (Jimenez-Luque 2021). All the above can be effective and the challenge for First Nations and Indigenous leaders globally is always having to navigate different worldviews. This paper contributes to both longstanding and emerging approaches to and models of First Nations and Indigenous leadership. First Nations and Indigenous leaders operating within organisations as employees, whether in senior positions or otherwise, are often challenged by the need to navigate the organisation's structures and must be tactical and strategic in how they operate (Stewart and Warn 2017). This is necessary for the legitimisation and authentication of their identity and in continuing their relevance and maintaining the connection to their communities.

Here in *Nyoongar* Country, Aboriginal Elders are engaged with a number of health services, where they can provide Aboriginal employees with additional cultural and strategic support to drive community priorities within the organisation and be heard and valued. Elders also offer a relational view of leadership that invites service leaders and executive staff to step outside the bounds of their organisational roles to be more visible in and transparent to the community (Wright et al. 2023). In doing so, the service leaders shift their positions for they now must be more directly accountable to Aboriginal communities; there is nowhere to hide. What these service leaders have come to realise in their work with Elders is not only the difference in approaches to leadership but also the insights they have gained about the limitations of their own leadership style (Stewart and Warn 2017). The capacity building and professional development of First Nations and Indigenous leaders that manifests as "two-ways" leadership does not fully acknowledge the need for non-Indigenous leaders to reflect on and make changes to their own leadership style. The Elders, however, have opened up a space in which non-Indigenous leaders can explore their own assumptions about leadership and critically reflect on their engagement with Aboriginal people—including Elders. This changed approach to leading their organisation is positively influenced by cross-cultural exchanges and relationships; a decolonised leadership at play (Burgess et al. 2023).

Leadership literature is vast. In summary, leadership has been described by traits, behaviours and strategies befitting one who governs or stewards resources (including people as valued human resources). An in-depth literature review is outside the scope of this paper; however, we acknowledge the depth and breadth of leadership theory, particularly in the context of organisational change theory (Gram-Hanssen 2021; Stouten et al. 2018). There are multiple variants, contexts, intentions and goals that serve to define leadership and its related theories (Doyle and Hungerford 2015). Much of the leadership literature is centred on western, patriarchal and hierarchical forms and experiences of leadership. Our intention in this paper is to broaden the concept of leadership to include Aboriginal worldviews while being mindful to not essentialise First Nations, Indigenous and Aboriginal forms of leading and leadership (Burgess et al. 2023).

In this paper, we highlight the relational aspects of the ways in which Elders exert influence on the leaders of mainstream health services that have been participating in the LFMF program of research (Debakarn 2024). The impact of the Elders stems from the relationships they have cultivated with the executive staff within these organisations, in particular, the chief executive officers (CEOs)—the "bosses" or *biddiyas* (Mullins 2007). This paper explores the dynamics and nuances of these relationships through an in-depth, instrumental case study (Stake 1995 in Hyett et al. 2014, p. 2). Dialogue between four Aboriginal Elders, who are members of the Elder co-researcher group in the program of research, and the CEO of a large metropolitan-based non-government mental health service organisation was captured during a recorded focus group. The Elders and the CEO have developed a relationship over eight years.

The focus group helped to better understand a more nuanced and contextualised view of leadership and the aspects that come into play when Elders described "acts of leading". It allowed the conversations to slow down and go *debakarn* (steady), to go deeper and engage and be introspective using an Aboriginal worldview lens. There was also space for tangential stories to be shared, as the Elders tend to present ideas and thoughts in the form of stories, linked both historically and contemporaneously, as a form of teaching and guiding others, as they experienced with those Elders who came before them (Kelly and Nicholson 2021).

To this end, the paper less describes leadership per se and more captures the relational process through which Elders reconnect their experiences, learnings, histories and endeavours to the mantel of "Elder" ascribed to them by their peers, communities and families. As echoed in Kelly and Nicholson (2021, p. 2), "[i]n societies that recognise the knowledge held by place, it is the work of leadership to nurture relationships with place in order to draw on this knowledge". This validation is a (re)strengthening, revitalising the place Elders hold in Nyoongar culture, an experience they willingly share with non-Aboriginal leaders who humbly bear witness to this recognition and are in turn changed by it. As partners in this research, the Elders play a number of roles: Elders for the organisation representing the Aboriginal community; research participants in the co-design and discussion process; and co-researchers actively engaged in the APAR process. In every aspect of their involvement, the leadership and participation of the Elders is crucial to the collaborative relationship, hence the recognition of their co-researcher and co-author roles.

2. Methodology

Aboriginal Participatory Action Research (APAR) is the overall approach used for the LFMF Project that has emerged over the past few decades in Australia as part of a broader decolonisation movement aimed at affirming and applying Aboriginal ways of being, knowing and doing that have existed for thousands of years (Martin 2003; Rigney 1999; Smith 1999). Aboriginal researchers are now leading the way in foregrounding the voices of Aboriginal people (Dudgeon et al. 2020; Wright et al. 2023). Situated on *Whadjuk Nyoongar boodja* (land), LFMF conducts research using a "Nyoongar-led approach . . . held by meaningful dialogue; story-ed, embodied, immersive, and framed by intercultural experiences that have ultimately deepened relationships between mainstream service providers and the local Nyoongar community" (Wright et al. 2023). However, it is incumbent on

the researchers and the often-inflexible institutions in which they work, to take a more critical stance on ways and means of conducting research so that the systems and structures do not impede the engagement of participants as co-researchers. History has shown how damaging research endeavours have been to many Aboriginal communities such that they are untrusting of research agendas and objectives and the systemic racism still present within mainstream institutions (Smith 1999; Watego 2021).

Relationships in the context of APAR are, thus, authentic and meaningful where there is a rebalancing of power; where Aboriginal contributions are privileged and valued; and, where views are heard and acted upon, are reciprocal and of benefit to all involved, and are multi-layered, complex and ever-deepening (Dudgeon et al. 2020; Wright et al. 2023). Meaningful relationships are also robust enough to hold honest and rigorous discussions without diminishing those involved. The LFMF program of research is one such example of the development of a sustained co-designed research agenda (Wright et al. 2021a). Of course, participatory action and change endeavours remain a struggle and thus continue to assert First Nation values and ways of working, in particular, through the guidance of Elders who have spent much of their lives as change agents and activists.

APAR relationships are intertwined, holding one another, and are not individualised or separated out to focus on a single aspect of the outcomes of, or intentions within, these relationships. Using this APAR approach, LFMF has found that a key learning for non-Indigenous service leaders is the realisation that engaging in a meaningful relationship with one or two Elders enables other relationships to be cultivated as the level of trust deepens but also grows outwards to include other Aboriginal community members (Wright et al. 2021b).

3. Method: Setting up a Group Yarning Space

An instrumental case study (Stake 1995) is used to better understand a phenomenon, in this instance, the ways in which Elders influence leaders. To develop the case study, the research team co-designed the focus group questions with the Elders and based on the analysis of an earlier series of semi-structured interviews with Elder co-researchers and executive service staff from which themes about leadership and leading change were derived. These interviews were conducted during the baseline and evaluation phases of the LFMF project. The key themes relating to leadership included the following: "role of Elders", "acts of leading", and "leading change". These themes were correlated with the themes derived from the semi-structured interviews held with senior executive staff at the same time. The group yarning questions were developed from these comparisons where it was identified that there were different worldview understandings of "leadership", "leading change" and "acts of leading" across the Elder and service leader participant group.

The group yarning questions related to how the Elders saw themselves as leaders or *biddiyas* and what their experiences as Elders were like in the context of engaging with non-Indigenous service leaders. Demonstrating "acts of leading" seemed more relevant than defining "leadership" as a concept as the Elders often focus on "walking the walk" (that is, setting an example by modelling their expectations for others).

The case study format was chosen as it acknowledges the ongoing relationship the researchers had with the Elders and the CEO during the project and in the conduct of the research activities. The case study is "captured in a relationship between the researcher and informants and presented to engage the reader, inviting them to join in this interaction and in case discovery' (Stake 1995 in Hyett et al. 2014, p. 2). To aid in the rigour of the case study, in this instance, to better understand the nuances of "acts of leading change," themes and sub-themes derived from the earlier analysis of the semi-structured interviews with Elders and executive staff are used to critique elements of leadership that arise during the focus group conversation.

Two female Elders (Aunty Sandra and Aunty Irene) and two male Elders (Uncle Peter and Uncle Albert) attended the focus group, as did the CEO, a non-Indigenous man of Anglo Australian descent in his late thirties. Two of the Elders had worked with the CEO for eight years and the other two Elders had worked with the CEO for three years. Three

researchers attended: a young Nyoongar woman (Tiana) working as a research associate, who facilitated the group yarn; an older Nyoongar woman in a senior researcher role (Anne-Marie); and an older non-Indigenous woman of Anglo Australian decent (Margaret), also in a senior researcher role.

The key quotations that capture the essence of group conversations are exceptionally valuable in representing peoples' voices. But there is much to be gained by also adding an extended passage from the group yarn to paint a more detailed picture of how the dialogue unfolds. Denzin (1989, p. 83) describes this as going "beyond mere fact and surface appearances . . . present[ing] detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another. It enacts what it describes". Building quality relationships between Elders, co-researchers and the organisation takes time, so striving to capture the human flavour of the interaction is important (Fast and Kovach 2019; Wilson 2001).

Humans are complex; relationships unfold and involve both testing and play; voices are not always in perfect harmony; diversity and differences need to be honoured and held; integrity and credibility require a level of honesty and transparency that involves risk and courage. These are all reasons why we include an extended segment of the "yarning" in this paper (Forbes 2020; Milroy et al. 2022; Wright et al. 2023). Its inclusion provides an opportunity to appreciate the interplay of the Elders and others around the table, in the circle, as they share their experiences (Cox et al. 2022a).

4. Setting

The project team pay careful attention to ensuring that the locations are as culturally appropriate and conducive to Aboriginal ways of being and doing as possible. The group yarn was arranged to be recorded in the partner organisation's boardroom, named after the Elders with whom they work. This setting brought everyone together (and helped with uninterrupted recording as well). As the Elders have met on many occasions in the boardroom, they were quite relaxed and at ease. The project team always provide morning tea, an expected routine and customary when engaging and meeting with the Elders, and an integral ingredient in establishing the environment for relational engagement.

5. Researchers' Positioning

The LFMF research team undertook a rigorous pre-coding and analysis process to derive themes from focus groups and baseline interviews, including co-researchers' perceptions and feedback on the paper as it was developed to ensure that this was a genuinely collective community process. The Elder co-researchers' leadership and knowledge inform the positioning of all researchers on the LFMF team, together with the broader Community co-researcher members.

6. Ethics

The LFMF Project was approved by the Western Australian Aboriginal Health Ethics Committee (772) and the Human Research Ethics Committee at Curtin University (HRE2017-0446).

7. Grounding Stories through Yarns with Elders

Earlier in the LFMF project, Elders described how they understood what "being Aboriginal" meant to them, mostly expressed through the very stories they told and the way in which they engaged with the researchers. Many of these stories were shared in places that resonated for the Elders—simply, their gardens, suburbs, streets, and for most, located on *Nyoongar boodja*, the land that holds all. The interrelated themes derived from these yarns demonstrate a deep connection to Country and place, growing up on Country, relationship to the land, historical dispossession and disconnection through Stolen Generation experiences (Gilbert 2019). Cultural practices and protocols and stories and language all featured strongly with Elders. From this, we were able to ground the research with the Elders in an Aboriginal worldview, the very lived experience of the Elders and their families and communities.

The Elders' lived experiences have informed the way in which the research is conducted. Likewise, senior service staff have come to understand that the approach they take with the Elders is grounded in the relationships they have established and sustained with them. As these relationships deepen, so too does their understanding of the leadership qualities the Elders bring to these engagements.

The case study you are about to read is a transcript of a recorded focus group, together with researchers' observation and coding meeting notes, and highlights these dynamics in a way interview data often cannot. It is contextual, felt, lived and explored in a shared space that includes historical as well as contemporary (and in some cases momentary) references, all of which serve to demonstrate the prowess of the Elders as "leaders of our time."

8. *Biddiyas Wangkiny*—Elders Talking: A Case Study

We start with the first question Tiana puts to the group, leaning more toward the Elders in the room. "What does biddiya to biddiya mean to you? How does it translate in this space of working together between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal leaders?"

Uncle Peter begins. "Well, it's been told to me that *biddi* is actually a path and *biddiya* is someone who leads down that path. So, if you're starting off, *biddi* is the path that you're going to walk on, and the leader watches the *biddi* and makes sure that path is safe that you're going to walk in. So, making sure there's no obstacles or anything like that. So, they're protecting whoever is following. So, that's what we're doing. So, they call us *biddiya*: we're doing things now for people to come.

Tiana responds: "I like that so much more than boss. It's kind of like ownership, right?**"**

"I got that from a couple of other Elders after consulting because I was always wondering what it meant." Uncle Peter refers to the Elders he sees weekly at a local community centre. It is evident that he admires and has great respect for these Elders.

The CEO, Adrian, interjects: "So, it's more about responsibility than authority then". Tiana adds, "And accountability".

"Yes," says Uncle Peter. "Exactly. Yes, so it's more of, like Adrian said, it's more about responsibility than authority. So, it is leadership, you know, in that sense."

Adrian continues. "So, it's making a safe way forward for people coming behind you."

"Yes. Yes." Uncle Peter is emphatic: "It's making sure that the path that you're going to walk down, that you go down, is safe if you're following us."

Margaret, the *Wadjulla* [white] researcher, has been closely observing the exchange and notices that Aunty Irene has been listening intently. She responds. "In the *Wadjulla* world, well, they're the *biddiyas,* but they're *biddiyas* in their right, and we as Elders are *biddiyas* in our right here, but they don't ... when we come together like this, we are still *biddiyas* and the *Wadjulla biddiyas*, they listen to us. Otherwise, things just won't ... to us it won't ... we'd say no to things. If they're asking us, you know, "How would this work? Would it work this way or that way?" and we say, "No, no, you don't. This goes another way," then that's making us the *biddiyas*". Her words are slow and pointed and it becomes evident that Aunty is explaining the fact that Elders are leaders regardless of the *Wadjulla* leaders; that is, Elders are always leaders no matter what they are doing or who they are with.

There's a pause as everyone takes in what Aunty Irene has put forward. The room feels reflective, letting the points sink in a little more.

Uncle Peter again speaks: "I just want to say too that we're Elders now, *biddiyas* as you call it, but twenty years ago, I wasn't and I think I actually, like I said, I respect those Elders that were before me, especially my family members that I've gained some knowledge from, and I think I appreciate them being there at the time. A few of them now have gone on, but I think that as we become Elders, I think we appreciate more because when we, twenty years ago, I think we don't really understand or realize the information that they're giving us until they're gone and, you know, sometimes I really go, 'I should've listened,' because what they were telling me was spot-on, you know, and I think that generations to come will ... because twenty years ago, I think that a lot of the information that we were getting has helped now compared to where we were twenty years ago.

Aunty Sandra adds: "We're the *biddiyas* in our families. They want to know something or help or . . . I've got a great-grandbaby who is premature, so our granddaughter looks to us for help, and so it starts from that, our families. We're the bosses of our family, you know".

Tiana concurs: "It's not a choice, is it?" Aunty Sandra and Aunty Irene respond in unison saying, "No. No, it's not a choice."

Tiana then asks, "So what then is a CEO? A leader of an organisation like. . . [this]?"

There's a pause and then the CEO responds. "So, as CEO, I have lots of projects that other people in the organisation lead, and I just need to catch up with them periodically to check in how they're going, and when it's a practical project, I can delegate that to other people. One of the reasons why I can't delegate this and why, you know, every time the Elders are here, I'm in a meeting, is because this is about culture change. It's not about a practical ticking a box of a project and, you know, working through a timeline of the project. So, a CEO can't actually delegate culture change work because no one else can lead the culture of the organisation. So, that's why I think from the perspective of a CEO, this would never work if I ask senior managers to meet with Elders because, from my perspective, no employee is ever going to feel comfortable leading the culture change of an organisation because they're always not going to have the authority to do that."

Aunty Irene again steps into the conversation at this point and alludes to the length of the relationships between Adrian and the Elders: "You worked very hard with us then, and it was Adrian that really, you know. . ."

"Who changed it," Uncle Albert finishes Aunty Irene's point.

"And kept it going until he became boss, big *biddiya* now," adds Aunty Irene with a grin. Adrian sits adjacent to her around a large boardroom table. Aunty Irene is framed by a window behind her, casting a sunny glow around her head.

Margaret, the *Wadjulla* researcher, notes Aunty Irene's point about Adrian not being the CEO at the time they first began their partnership at Richmond Wellbeing. Adrian began his relationship with Aunty Irene and Uncle Albert first as the organisation's Operations Executive before successfully applying for the CEO position some four years later. It was then that Uncle Peter and Aunty Sandra joined to support the organisation alongside Aunty Irene and Uncle Albert. Margaret too has been involved in the project from these early days and understands the context to which Aunty Irene refers, asking:

"Aunty Irene, I'm curious as to how this was for you. What did you think about Adrian being the main point of contact for you rather than the CEO at that time? Given you Elders had made a point of wanting to work with the *biddiyas*. So, what helped to keep that going for you from your thinking?"

Almost in unison, Aunty Irene and Uncle Albert respond saying that they valued their connection with Adrian because of Adrian's own depth of commitment: "He committed himself." Aunty Irene continues, "Adrian pushed that. And they respected Adrian and had confidence in him to do their job for them. That's what it was, yeah, and they didn't have time."

Adrian confirms this was the case. Although he was representing the leadership of the organisation, he was given great flexibility with how to do this, spending his time and some money to maintain his engagement with the Elders. "Yeah. It was a help for me because I had no barriers in terms of the time and the money I spent on the project [that is, with the Elders]."

"So, coming back to what is the role of a CEO then, well, all the staff know that where I spend my time is the highest priority. So, when I come to the meetings [with the Elders] and I invest in the time and I communicate to staff and show that I'm personally invested, it says to my staff, this is serious and this is important".

Tiana turns to another question. "So, what makes [Adrian] a good leader? I mean you talk about having a trusting relationship with Adrian and it works so well because you do trust. What are these qualities that you look for in a CEO or someone that you're working with to be able to do the work that you do as a leader? So, I mean, you talk about

open-mindedness, you talk about trusting and all these other things, but is there anything else there that you look for or that you feel from Adrian from your work with him?"

Aunty Sandra responds first. "Well, he's straight out, eh? He'll say what's right and what's not right, you know, and yes or no."

Uncle Peter expands: "Adrian is very approachable, you know. You can just set up a meeting and talk to him. You know that you can have a conversation with confidence with Adrian, and he'll point you in the right direction and give you good advice and if he can't, he'll find it."

Aunty Irene interjects to explain how Adrian also makes time to see Aboriginal staff in the organisation. "His door is open even if they want to go and talk to him. They don't have to go to their manager in their area if they're really concerned. They can go straight to Adrian, you know."

Tiana then turns to Adrian. "Adrian, you've heard the Elders talk about what they think makes a good leader in the space and I've heard you speak about some of the other CEOs that you've had interactions with. What are some of the qualities that you think make a good leader in the space and some of the qualities that you found or learned along your journey?"

Tiana's reference to being "in the space" refers to the project and the use of the engagement approach developed in collaboration with Elders. The approach prompts non-Aboriginal service leaders to reflect on their own leadership approach and share the decision-making power with the Elders.

Adrian responds, "Yeah. So, you've got to be personally invested. Unless you're personally invested in this, you will not make a change. You'd have to allocate the time as well. You don't ever have a meeting with an Elder for half an hour. You need to allocate the time in meetings, but also socially. So, I mean we go out for lunch fairly regularly. We catch up and chat. So, it's not just formal meeting time. You need to have a higher level of social and emotional intelligence to work in a very different manner. Most *Wadjullas* would take thirty seconds to see how everyone is going and we just get straight into the work, and we have an action list, and it's all very transactional, and if you simply work like that with Elders, it would not work. You need to have social and emotional intelligence to really learn a new way of working. You need to have the ability to unpick all of the stereotypical views that *Wadjulla* people will have developed. *Wadjulla* people will say, 'Oh, I'm not at all racist. I'm very open-minded,' but there is no way that you can grow up as a *Wadjulla* person in this country and not have ignorant, racist, stereotypical views that you need to unpack, and you need to have very uncomfortable conversations, as I've had many times, to unlearn things that I thought were correct and I grew up thinking for decades that they were correct. So, you need to have the courage to do that. Also, CEOs don't like being told off and they don't like being wrong. They like to be the smartest person in the room, and you can be a CEO for thirty years, but when you're learning with Elders, you need to realize that you're in grade one, and it's a whole new way of working. You need to be prepared to make mistakes and get your arse kicked occasionally. Sometimes with Aboriginal clients or staff or out in the community, someone will get really pissed off and they'll give you a serious piece of their mind because you'll be a *Wadjulla* CEO in the room. You just have to deal with it. Like you might not think it's right or whatever, but you got to have the humility just to deal with it and absorb a bit of heat, but if you're going to work in this space, you're going to make mistakes and I've made some really big mistakes over the years, and you need to be prepared to make big mistakes."

"I tested Adrian out once when he became the CEO," Uncle Albert says. "He used to have an old building out there in Bentley. He had an office there. We went over there and I said to Adrian, 'Are we going to have an input into this?' He said, 'Yeah.' and I said, 'Okay, then. When that building gets up, I want to see an Aboriginal flag up there. See what you can do.' I thought to myself, 'I'll just see what he can do here', and he wasn't the CEO, but then he took it back to the Board. Within a couple of months, I got an answer back, they

have put a flag post and it cost them four thousand dollars. That was a test to see if he was really committed in what he's saying about Aboriginal input into the building."

"Yeh, it was commitment," added Aunty Sandra.

Adrian responds with some further reflections on some of the practical aspects he and the Elders have worked on over the eight years of their working relationship. These invariably include taking care of and respectfully holding the Aboriginal workers in the organisation.

"The Elders have always said to me, 'Look, we want to have a safe space for Aboriginal staff. So, we want to know how many staff you've got here, how well you're retaining them, at what level they're being paid, so not just being paid on the lowest level.' Then the conversation extended to, 'Well, how many Aboriginal clients do you have?' So, what we've always brought it back to is an Aboriginal person living in Armadale this morning is experiencing mental distress. Would they actually feel safe coming to this service? Who cares if we've got an Aboriginal flag on our email signature? It means nothing if the Aboriginal person doesn't want to come to the service. So, the Elders have been really good at making it very practical, you know, 'This is what we want to achieve.' I think it's a challenge sometimes for organisations to take the theory of reconciliation and actually ask, but what does it mean on a practical level, and the Elders have always brought us back to where the rubber hits the road."

At this point in the conversation, Uncle Peter leans into Margaret sitting beside him and whispers a question: "Can I ask this of Adrian? I want to ask, 'Did you feel threatened by Aboriginal people?'" "Of course, please, you can ask anything you'd like," Margaret replies. "Well, I want to run it past you first, as I'm not sure." Margaret writes down the question in her notebook and shows Uncle Peter to be sure she has heard the question correctly. "Would you prefer if I asked it, Uncle Peter?" "Yes, please. I think so," he replies.

"Can I throw in an extra question?" Margaret asks, seeking approval from the group. "I think it's a good question and it probably goes to the earlier stages of the work. Adrian, can I ask, did you ever feel threatened by Aboriginal people?" Margaret indicates to Uncle Peter as an acknowledgement that the question came from him.

Adrian responds: "I wouldn't say I felt threatened, but I felt so far out of my depth, so far out of my depth. So, I can go to a meeting at the Mental Health Commission and there's all sorts of problems going. I can go to the Chief Psychiatrist to talk about someone whose died on our sites and I'm not nervous. I can go into negotiating ideally about the enterprise bargaining agreement and I'm not nervous, because these are the ways that *Wadjulla* people work, but I have felt very out of my depth in working with Aboriginal people because it's a totally different way of working."

Uncle Peter follows the question up with another. "Okay. Now, having asked that question of you and got your answer, do you feel that other CEOs would feel threatened and don't want to face Aboriginal people? And is that going to be like an issue with Elders to try and get other CEOs on board to do this work?"

Adrian replies: "Well, I think a lot of *Wadjulla* CEOs have a view that when they work in this space, they think, well, this is what Aboriginal people need and this is how we'll help, but it's not about helping. I will never say, and I don't often make comments about Aboriginal people. I'll typically say, 'Look, I don't know but this is what the Elders have told me, this is what we're thinking about,' but I'll never say, 'Aboriginal people need this or that, need to do that or they need this.' I just say, 'The Elders consistently tell me this is what they want and I'm thinking about that.'"

Adrian pauses here. "I know we can do more in this space, but I've got lots of CEOs who come to me and say, 'Wow, you guys are really going well. You must really be comfortable and know all this about the space.' I say, 'Oh, no. I just watch and learn and just ask questions and, you know, I don't know very much.' But I think it's a dangerous thing if a CEOs says, 'Well, I've been to a couple of conferences and read a bit and I know a lot in this space.' I always get nervous when I hear *Wadjulla* people say, 'I'm very experienced working in this space,' and I just think, 'Okay, this is going to be a disaster.'"

9. Learnings from the Yarn: Locating Relationships and Learning about Each Other

This exchange comes from eight years of a relationship. The Elders have become an integral part of the organisation's operations, governance and culture. As relationships deepen, familiarity and trust grow. Sometimes things are not said because they no longer need to be said. This case study is an example of how the relationship between Elders and service leaders opens up different ways of working. Similar examples exist from other organisations with whom LFMF has worked. Governance is shared to create a different environment for making decisions and "doing business". Resources are redirected to support different priorities expressed through conversations and meetings with the Elders.

The Elders have contributed enormously to both the growth and maturity of this service leader. So much so that the changes are not only felt at an individual level but are being integrated into the organisation. This CEO has demonstrated an openness and humility to be teachable. As a leader, he has demonstrated how he has applied his new learning. He has integrated new ways of working into his leadership practice to change the way his organisation operates so he can respond in more culturally safe ways to Aboriginal people accessing its services. It is to these aspects we now turn in our findings from the yarn.

The extended group yarn captured in this paper further illustrates the impact that the Elders have had on organisational change. Drawing on the exchange, five key elements have been identified based on this case.

Openness and humility to be teachable: "*You need to have uncomfortable conversations.*"

Change to better serve Aboriginal people will not happen, nor be sustained, if leaders do not listen to and learn from Elders (Burgess et al. 2023). The CEO demonstrates he has gone beyond a surface-level self-reflection exercise. He has the humility and vulnerability to acknowledge that, based on his understanding of the pervasive nature of racism, ongoing vigilance is needed to struggle with patterns and behaviours that have been culturally naturalised and normalised in Australia. Seeing this and taking the responsibility to be aware, to learn, and to take action is a marker of deeper-level reflexivity. He is aware that relational transformation is a long-term process (Wright and O'Connell 2015).

Commitment and listening and responding: "*That was a test to see if he was really committed.*"

The Elders clearly have much respect for the CEO's commitment to listening and responding to them. One instance of this is how, earlier in their relationship, Uncle Albert had tested the CEO's commitment and action-taking when he mentioned that he would like to see the Aboriginal flag flying at the new premises. Uncle Albert knew this would send a clear signal to the Aboriginal community that the service was there for them. The CEO showed that he had heard Uncle Albert and acted appropriately.

Unlearning to apply new learning: "*[He] really worked hard with us*" to make changes.

The CEO is aware that he has much to unpack and unlearn. One of the greatest struggles for *Wadjullas* is to slow down and not rush into doing things. The CEO responds to the Elders' *debakarn* (steady, steady) influence: he has invested time into building and sustaining the relationship; he has shown respect to the *biddiyas* and has enabled trust to grow over time. The CEO is striving to model the behaviours and standards the Elders and he are working towards in the organisation. As the CEO says, "You need to have social and emotional intelligence to really learn a new way of working."

Integrating new leadership practices: "*Because this is about culture change.*"

The diffusion of responsibilities and shared accountability has been driven by the Elders: "We are still *biddiyas* and the *wadjulla biddiyas*; they listen to us." Even after eight years of working with the Elders, the CEO recognises that "we can do more in this space." The challenge for the CEO is to ensure the influence of the Elders permeates throughout the organisation. It is his challenge to ensure that the influence of the *biddiya* to *biddiya* relationship results in positive change at all levels.

Stewarding resources to facilitate decisions that impact Aboriginal clients: "*It means nothing if the Aboriginal person doesn't want to come to the service.*"

The Elders' influence on the CEO and culture change of the organisation is evident in the CEO's willingness to take action on cultural safety and employment of Aboriginal staff and Aboriginal clients. The Elders asked about Aboriginal staffing levels, conditions and retention, and the number of Aboriginal clients. These are key factors in ensuring the Aboriginal community feels culturally safe. The CEO recognises that he must respond in practical ways so that the service he provides is better for Aboriginal people.

10. Conclusions

Leadership literature often overlooks the basis of our human interactions, lived as relationships. If we are to change the way First Nations, Indigenous and Aboriginal peoples interact with systems in order to fully participate as citizens, we must start with the healing power of relationships (Cox et al. 2022b; Wright et al. 2023). It is from these relationships that new ways of working emerge. Innovations, actions and progress stem from a rich diversity of views that respond to the complexities in our world which we share in together. There are many political challenges, nationally and locally in Australia, that make for a slow and difficult pathway to positive change (Cox et al. 2022a; Watego 2021). At the same time, local Elders and senior knowledge holders have strong voices, leadership and ideas to share with service providers to make sure the path is safe (Burgess et al. 2023; Cox et al. 2022b; Milroy et al. 2022; Wright et al. 2021a).

This paper presents an instrumental case study of four Elders and one CEO yarning together about their understandings of leading and working together as *biddiyas*, or bosses. It explores the nuances inherent in the relationship between the Elders and the CEO and serves to highlight the different worldviews about leading and acts of leading. The five key learnings identified from the yarning can be applied in working for positive organisational change, but all hinge on building strong relationships with Elders and First Nations communities. While it is important to be wary about generalising from a single case study with one CEO, other ongoing LFMF projects also indicate that mainstream leaders can adjust their leadership approaches by reflecting on their own values, practices and approaches by engaging with other leaders—in this case, Elders—and sharing their leadership power and position. The implications here fall on governance and cultural safety and the impacts felt on the organisational workforce. Broadening one's views about governance to incorporate the decision-making of others who see themselves equally accountable to their communities, as the Elders in this case study invariably do, means that resources can be redirected to support areas of most need without diminishing the work of those in other areas of the organisation. In some cases, when the partner organisations joined the LFMF project they were somewhat embarrassed to admit that while their service sites were often located amidst a large Aboriginal community, they had little to no Aboriginal clients. The relationships with Elders and their particular style of leadership have influenced the CEOs and through doing so shifted how the organisations respond to Aboriginal people they invariably are tasked—and funded—to service.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The LFMF Project was approved by the Western Australian Aboriginal Health Ethics Committee (772) and the Human Research Ethics Committee at Curtin University (HRE2017-0446).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Data is unavailable due to privacy and ethical restrictions.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Notes

1 The term "Aboriginal" has been used in this article to acknowledge the significance of place and that this project was conducted on *Nyoongar Boodja*, Aboriginal country, in Western Australia with members from different clan groups. The authors acknowledge that First Nations and Indigenous peoples around the world may identify with their local clan or group name and mean no disrespect in using the term Aboriginal.

2 Work, as defined from a Eurocentric perspective that is based on transactional principles purely as reward for work, is an inadequate definition of work done by Elders. We will explore this further in another paper. For the purposes of this paper the Elders adopt the principles of relationships where intention is different and underpin how they define work.

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