

“The Alice Springs workshop conducted by Gray Poehnell was a unique observation experience for DEWR staff because of the variety of differences in the participants’ work history. Some of the participants coming to the table were developing professional careers in career counselling, while others explained that they could not get past all types of barriers that perpetuated their dependence on welfare. It was a heartening experience to witness how deeply some of the activities, particularly story telling resonated with those who might end up extensively practicing the Guiding Circles career path activities with clients and with the participants that have little or no work experience. Even though this latter group did not have jobs, they had life experience and this activity awakened recognition and self confidence in the skills they have developed to survive life events that were daunting and often tragic.”

– Amanda McNamara,
Department of Employment
and Workplace Relations,
Government of Australia

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Guiding Circles Co-Author Gray Poehnell and Kerry Phillips, an Aboriginal trainee, share a dawn camel ride in the Uluru region of Australia.

For three years in a row now, Gray Poehnell has journeyed to Australia on behalf of the AHRDCC, to share a workbook concept he helped develop – the Guiding Circles approach to creating a successful career path.

As a guest of Australia’s Department of Education and Workplace Relations, Poehnell’s task was to help the department discover new career strategies for Aboriginals. “The Guiding Circles workbook is not a book to push people through steps but, instead, it’s a process or approach... the intent is not just to educate individuals but whole communities, in the process,” says Poehnell.

Ultimately, the purpose of the guiding circle workshop is to foster self-esteem, restore hope and create vision. In doing so, lives and communities can be changed for the better, Poehnell says.

Like Canada, Australia also has a low percentage of Aboriginal representation in the workplace. “What we saw was very similar to Canada...the issues are virtually identical between the two countries,” Poehnell says.

As an example, Poehnell notes that a famous Ayers Rock resort is serviced by 1200 staff of which only 14 are Aboriginal workers.

“The challenge for many Aboriginals is to become pathfinders...to break new ground,” says Poehnell. “But they also need employers who are pathfinders as well.”

This year’s Australian program saw the Guiding Circles concept tested in three types of Aborigi-

nal communities; a major city, a rural centre and a remote area. To accomplish this, one-week workshops were delivered in Darwin, Alice Springs and Ayers Rock.

Much of the success of the Australian guiding circle program lies with its enthusiastic participants and its tangible results. These results include the forging of new relationships with the business community, a proposed adoption of the concept nation-wide and future train-the-trainer workshops to facilitate the deployment of instructors across the country. Eventually, an Aussie version of the guiding circle workbook may also be developed.

Celebrating on the heels of this latest successful visit down under, Poehnell says that another government department, the Department of Education and Skilled Trades, is also interested in pursuing Canada’s guiding circle model.

Since 2003, Poehnell has delivered nearly 50 workshops across Canada, helping to facilitate the guiding circle process at home. Participants have come from a cross-section of society and include artists, business people, corrections officials and government staff.

So far, in Australia, the bulk of the attendees have been career or human resource practitioners, although staff from Parks Australia have also attended.

According to many workshop participants, the impact of the guiding circle process of self-discovery is profound. “By the end, the participant gets to know themselves...to feel they have value,” says Poehnell.