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What would you say as a leader in a MACS service are the financial responsibilities in managing your vision day-to-day?

I am aware of my *amazing and deadly leadership skills* (lol), but my finance background is limited; other than attending the odd 'financial matters' training workshops, I have no formal account keeping qualifications. Yet, the responsibility for a significant amount of government and community money is mine. So straight away when I came into my current position of leadership I accepted it on the condition of recruiting a bookkeeper, a person who had the financial skills that the service needed, knowing my own limited skills in such an important area.

Birralee MACS is an Aboriginal corporation that reports to Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations (ORIC) and a clear audit is essential for ongoing Aboriginal corporation status that is needed to support our community in so many ways, such as housing etc. Also the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), our primary funding body, requires a quarterly financial report for continued funding each year. Department of Community Services (now Department of Education and Communities) gives us a little bit too and they require the same. So you can imagine the need to get it right! We have a clerical person that completes all financial matters with my authorisation and we submit this to our accountant each month. Our bank accounts are linked to the accountant's system so each month it is balanced, same as the wages, petty cash etc. This is a costly part of our bookkeeping but necessary, so Birralee continues to operate a high-quality Aboriginal early childhood service. We have seen in New South Wales alone prominent Aboriginal early childhood services close due to difficulties with financial mismanagement. The financial state of the service determines so much that affects the day-to-day operation, so knowing I have support from the experts is reassuring and I can continue doing what I am better at—that is, leading the centre.

How do you use your financial records to inform your leadership recommendations and decisions?

Birralee MACS responds to the community, after all it is a community service, so when families have financial difficulties that impact on our fee collection, attendance and service delivery, really good policy around these issues is essential. Access is an important issue and the lack of places that support places for Aboriginal families and children is a high need in our area. We are constantly advocating for more places, so when the opportunity came to create more places through a state funding program we quickly looked at what we could do. The first thing was sustainability. How much would it cost? And continue to cost? We recruited again the 'experts'—our accountants—and the funding body. This was never an exercise around how much money we could make but how many places we could create.

Could you describe how you went about establishing a financially viable community-based multifunctional service?

We didn't have funds allocated for start-up costs to start 'researching'; we approached the funding body with our concern and they helped us apply for additional funding that they knew was available, so I think it is really important to be honest and let all parties know what you can and can't do ... and if limited, ask what support can be offered. And can I tell you, I have made the best professional relationships based on this that have continued and you find yourself continually supporting each other not in a deficit way but like a relationship.

What were the challenges that you encountered and how did you overcome these problems?

In working with DEEWR I became aware of specific strategies to support families in paying their fees. This decision to discuss linking fee payments to Centrelink payments and having an automatic transfer was a hard decision at first and not one that everyone appreciated. I eventually saw this as a method to support families in paying their fees regularly and not falling behind and accruing a very large amount which I knew they would never be able to pay back. As our biggest risk is non-payment of fees then this was the only choice that I could have made. So as a leader I had to weigh up what would be perceived as controversial to what would ensure we did not have families who could not catch up in paying their fees.

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