

“THE 7 UGLY TRUTHS KILLING INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP - AND WHAT CAN BE DONE TO STOP IT.”

BY WENDY WATEGO

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

This report is blunt and to the point, it is written to have impact and that means it may in fact upset you. If you are worried you may be offended or upset, then I suggest you keep on reading. It is time to begin a conversation about the historical core issues which continue to slowly poison us as First Nations peoples.

“The 7 Ugly Truths Killing Indigenous Leadership - And What Can Be Done To STOP It” has come about as a direct result of the healing and leadership work STARS Institute of Learning and Leadership has been doing for the last 5 years, particularly with Aboriginal leaders and Torres Strait Islander leaders from across the country.

Each month we will release one of the modern day Ugly Truths. This report includes the first Ugly Truth in the series.

This first report includes an overview and background of 7 myths that have their origins based in racism, violence and exclusion, and over time they have turned from myth to truth. They are unconscious, toxic and completely politically inappropriate in every way, yet they are embedded within the emotional landscape which helped shaped the identity of our nation.

All the leaders we have worked with have, at some level, been brainwashed into believing these Ugly Truths, and like it or not you probably have also.

Our intention is to bring these Ugly Truths to your consciousness and highlight the pervasive influence they are having on you, the quality of your life, and how they determine the direction and long term success and sustainability of your leadership. Included in each report are recommended simple short term strategies you can use immediately to reduce the impact these Ugly Truths have.

7 Ugly Truths Killing Indigenous Leadership

We in STARS contend that these are 7 of the Ugly Truths Killing Indigenous Leadership:

1. The blacker you are, the dumber you are and the poorer you are, the more Aboriginal you are.
2. Australia is the *lucky country...the land of a fair go!*
3. You're too white to be a Blackfella.
4. Racism isn't as bad as it used to be.
5. Aboriginal people should just get over it, forget the past and move on.
6. I want to be a good leader but I don't want to go big noting myself – that's a shame job.
7. Blackfellas can't be responsible for their own affairs.

It is our hope that you will recognise yourself in the trap of these modern day Ugly Truths, and that this report will empower you to do whatever it takes to liberate yourself from them.

Allow yourself space to really look at and feel the impact these Ugly Truths have on your life and your leadership. You are worth it! We strongly encourage that you take time to share your thoughts and experiences and feelings with others.

As a nation we need to re-program ourselves to value our humanity again and the strength it provides in bringing our cultures closer together rather than further apart. For far too long we have been expected to disconnect from our feelings and deal with serious issues at a superficial level. Australia has a real *tick-a-box* and *move-on* mentality when it comes to solving problems or getting stuff done.

What is most alarming about the many successful Blackfellas we have worked with is that in spite of all their spectacular achievements, the root of the challenges they are now faced with in the 21ST Century is not the historical trauma of the past and what had been done to them. Rather, it is what this past trauma has caused them to **think** and **feel** about themselves right now.

At some level they have internalised and fallen victim to, and become perpetrators of, the insidious myth that “Blackfellas aren’t as good as Whitefellas.”

BLACKFELLAS AREN’T AS GOOD AS WHITEFELLAS

The “Blackfellas aren’t as good as Whitefellas” myth is intrinsically linked to a sorry global history leading up to and following invasion. Australia inherited the black inferiority and white superiority belief which brought with it a legacy of tragedy and trauma.

The labelling of Aborigines and later Torres Strait Islanders as inferior and sub-human legitimised domination and legalised racism and segregation, powerfully influencing and strategically shaping the specific way in which Australia was colonised.

The first 179 years of colonisation was successful in brainwashing White Australia to believe that Blackfellas weren’t as good as Whitefellas. The use of physical and political violence was simultaneously used to force Blackfellas to play this role and know their place.

STARS Institute of Learning and Leadership has found that regardless of the positive milestones of the last 40+ years such as Australia’s endorsement of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, The Mabo Decision, The Walk for Reconciliation over the Sydney Harbour Bridge, and The Apology, something is still not working. The inferiority/superiority belief continues to lurk just beneath the surface of people’s consciousness. The belief has taken on a slippery intelligence of its own – continuing to impact people’s thinking, relationships, decision making and power of choice.

If you really want to change areas of your life and improve the results you are getting as a strong smart Blackfella leader, then you need to consider changing what’s going on inside you first. You need to begin unlearning and breaking free from the hidden constraints imposed upon you by colonial thinking.

As you read the First Ugly Truth “The blacker you are, the dumber you are and the poorer you are, the more Aboriginal you are,” we invite you to reflect on your life and your leadership and see if the Ugly Truth is true for you or not. Only you will know...

Ugly Truth 1

“The blacker you are, the dumber you are and the poorer you are, the more Aboriginal you are.”

Modern Day Realities

Blackfellas who aspire to become successful leaders in social change are outwardly encouraged and supported. Yet, if they fail or fall from grace that’s OK too, because you inwardly kind-a expected it!

For generations, the White superiority and Black inferiority myth has been instrumental in crafting a mentality of low to no expectations of success for Blackfellas. It sounds something like this:

- “Blacks have different size brains and that means they can never be as intelligent as White people.”
- “Blackfellas won’t amount to much.”
- “Blackfellas are not as good as White people.”
- “You can’t expect much really.”
- “You can’t rely on them - that’s just what they do, they go walkabout.”

As a nation we are now up against an epidemic of the indisputable evidence supporting how the building of this low expectations mindset for Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people is now being fulfilled and impacting all Australians:

- Low educational outcomes
- Low levels of sustained employment
- Low levels of good health and well-being
- Low levels of economic independence
- Low numbers of people in Federal and State Parliaments
- Low numbers of people in mainstream media
- Low numbers of people running their own successful business

Historical Roots

On invasion Aboriginal peoples were immediately categorised by the British according to the racial trend of the times as being sub-human because of our physical differences, and morally inferior because we had no recognisable politics, or familiar systems of social order such as religion, a legal system or formalised education.

In early written records we were labelled as animals, primitive, native, savage, and uncivilised. References to us in any documentation cleverly excluded the word “*people*”, dehumanising us even further and perpetuating the Black inferiority/White superiority myth.

By denying our intellect based on racist assumptions and myths, the British were able to deny our humanity and justify the brutal killing era of genocide that followed invasion.

By the mid 1800’s the Black inferiority/White superiority myth was deeply entrenched in the Australian culture and psyche. The stripping away of Blackfella culture, language, and identity enabled Aboriginal people to be indoctrinated with the idea that perhaps they were in fact, not humans at all capable of being civilised and educated, but property! Property to be stolen, bought, traded, sold, inherited, used, abused and disposed of... this was “business as usual”.

Policies of Protection and Assimilation were being influenced by the thinking that soon the Aboriginal population would die out. These policies were then formalised to give legislative power to White governments and authorities to legally:

1. Define who was and who was not a *real* Aborigine;
2. Determine how they were to be treated and what quality of life they would have.

The forcible removal of generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and babies from their families was a key strategy of the Assimilation policy. It was thought that they could be saved and civilized into White culture and had a better chance of survival, becoming White, blending in and having “the Blackfella bred out of them”.

If an Aboriginal child or baby was born a ‘half-caste’, and had:

1. lighter coloured skin, and looked like a White person they were more likely to be adopted or fostered into White homes. These children were more likely to be educated in a Whitefella school. If they did well academically and were socially fitting in, it was because they were being raised by good White people. If they struggled academically or

played up at school and were becoming a handful at home it was the 'Abo' coming out in them.

2. darker skin or looked "full-blood", they were more likely to be sent to a highly controlled segregated training institution or out to work. They were excluded from going to a white school and their level of education was very basic mostly focusing on training the girls to be domestic servants for middle-class White families and the boys to be labourers once they left the institutions. There was no encouragement or expectation for these children to complete school or aim to do anything other than manual and domestic work.

The generations of children forcibly removed from their families as a result of these government policies has become known as "the Stolen Generations".

Such discriminatory labelling, and the trauma caused by segregating generations of Blackfellas into categories of value according to the colour of their skin gave strength to the Black inferiority myth, and is at the foundation of the modern day *Ugly Truth 1* - "*the blacker you are, the dumber you are and the poorer you are, the more Aboriginal you are*".

Generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children had it drummed into them that they were worthless, they had no brains, and they wouldn't amount to anything but being a slave to the White man. The psychological damage and trauma that was being done wasn't just stripping away the children's cultural identity; it was destroying their self-esteem, self-worth, their capacity to think for themselves whilst killing their souls.

The policy of Assimilation wasn't really teaching these children how to grow up "White and right". In the eyes of White society they continued to be an inferior race. Instead it trained generations of Blackfellas to grow up illiterate, poor, dependent and to do what you were told or risk punishment and prison. It was an effective colonial capitalist strategy to ensure they could create and grow the Australian economy using Blackfellas as an instantly cheap labour force.

It was common for Blackfellas not to be paid a wage when they entered the workforce. Instead they were commonly paid in rations of food, clothing, and sometimes tobacco, rum and opium. In the pastoral industry rather than being paid, they were allowed to stay on or near their traditional land. During the 1920's Blackfellas were just beginning to be paid a minimal wage; however large proportions of their wages were never seen by them, instead the money was placed into government trust accounts. By the 1960's when it became law for Blackfellas to be paid wages in the pastoral industry many of them lost their jobs.

Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people were denied the opportunity of controlling their own incomes, growing their own wealth and managing their own land.

Even those children whose families managed to stay together during the 40's, 50's and 60's had a very limited education. Often Blackfellas were not allowed to live in towns and were excluded to the fringes usually near the dumps, cemeteries or industrial areas. Their living conditions and health were often poor and if they did pick up work it was low skilled, long hours, labour intensive work for low pay. Men would often have to go away from their families to follow seasonal work leaving their families to be run and managed by the women, causing a slow and lethal breakdown of the family.

The colonial strategy of keeping Blackfellas dumb, poor, dependent, and compliant had created a cycle of poverty and welfare dependency that was fast becoming a big problem. Contrary to the popular ideology, the breaching of human rights still existed after the 1967 Referendum, and systemic racism throughout Australia was deeply entrenched.

In the 1970's it became illegal to discriminate against people because of their race, and this gave many blackfellas a new sense of hope for the future particularly in the workplace, and in the provision of services such as health and housing. Finally perhaps at last we too get to enjoy living in the *land of a fair go*...hmmm... we will talk about that one in our next report.

Short Term “Benefits”

White People

This *Ugly Truth 1* enables White people to not confront their own racism and paternalism. The average White Australian has not been schooled in Australia's Black History, and finds it hard to relate to a Blackfella outside of the stereotypes they have been conditioned to believe and expect. They know how to treat a Blackfella who has dark skin, who has little education and is unemployed.

What they get challenged, especially in a professional working environment, how do they '*be with*' a Blackfella who is well accomplished, highly articulate or educated, holds degrees or is well schooled from experience, is in a position of authority and may in fact be more qualified than they are, and make more money than they do?

Many Whitefellas genuinely want to have a better understanding, build positive relationships, and make a difference. You can however, hear how embedded the Ugly Truth 1 is when they start asking questions and making statements which tries to fit us back into the stereotypes and racist beliefs they have grown up with. It may sound like;

1. Are your qualifications real or did you have to do a special course?
2. You speak really well.
3. You're too white to be Aboriginal.
4. Are you qualified to only work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?

Blackfellas

Consider that given the demands placed upon us now to perform in the workplace a hint of complacency in our work ethic is beginning to creep in. *Ugly Truth 1* enables us to make excuses to not work to our full leadership potential, dumb ourselves down, and hold off from giving our very best. This tends to activate our own doubts of low expectations and we risk falling into the habit of ignoring poor staff/colleague behaviour which makes the workplace hell and stops good work and outcomes being achieved.

This includes simple things like not keeping people accountable to deadlines and outcomes, ignoring racism, providing staff with lots of feel-good stuff on their performance reviews and evaluations but avoiding providing them with correction and further training when required; ignoring it when staff show up late for work; take too long for lunch or cigarette break; or don't follow procedures. These little things perpetuate the message of low expectations and train people in how to become dependent and under-achievers.

Short-Term Impacts on Indigenous Professionalism and Leadership

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Professionals and Leaders are under constant tension and pressure in having to:

1. diplomatically manage themselves around White people's ignorance and scepticism of their identity, their position, their credentials, and their authority;
2. continually give cross-cultural and history lessons to their Whitefella staff or colleagues;
3. put themselves in the firing line of Blackfella politics and community divisions;
4. deal with lateral violence and the threat of being called a Big Noter, or being criticised and ostracised if the Black community think you are moving ahead and speaking on their behalf.

5. be publicly accountable to do your job well, make a difference and get results. To do this many Blackfellas become super high achievers to the point of being workaholics, often resulting in them over committing themselves, often leading to some form of family or relationship breakdown, or they suffer from a life-style or stress related health condition often requiring medication.

Long-Term Impacts on Indigenous Professionalism and Leadership

We can no longer ignore the reality of the modern day impacts on the education and employment outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that this first Ugly racist Truth has had. *“The blacker you are, the dumber you are and the poorer you are, the more Aboriginal you are”* is insidious because it is designed to not only suppress achievement but, it also blames Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people for any academic failure and being unemployed.

Institutional racism breeds lateral violence and fuels the fire of suffering, intimidating its victims and is unbecoming of its perpetrators. These energies begin to insidiously kill off people’s passion and capacity to sustain their leadership, work together towards a common vision, and bring about peaceful and positive social change.

Nowadays strong, smart, and highly effective leaders are getting sicker and burning out quicker.



Short-Term Simple Strategies with Long-Term Profound Impacts

Self-care Cultural Education Practices

This self-care cultural education is designed to ground your identity and keep you connected to the sacredness of who you are as belonging to the longest living people in the world.

As you make self-care cultural practices part of your lifestyle, you will notice internal shifts start to happen as your ancient cultural codes of wisdom begin to unlock from your DNA.

As this happens you may notice a natural process of internal healing begins to occur. You may even notice your general health and well-being being given a positive boost.

Often with such a painful history, parts of our psyche can become trapped inside the trauma stories of the past, significantly impacting on how we live our life. Without knowing it, we pass these trauma stories and feelings down to the next generation. It is not uncommon for us Blackfellas to experience an unexplained constant feeling of being worried, unsafe, angry, resentful, scared, tired, sorry, confused and shamed.

As leaders, on the outside we may appear like we've got it all together, but on the inside our senses have become hyper-vigilant to issues of safety, trust and justice.

The self-care cultural educational practices, suggested below, empower you to begin liberating your own thinking, intellect and Being from the shackles of colonial conditioning.

Build Cultural Well-Being and Capital

Our identity and spirituality as an Aborigine or Torres Strait Islander are our greatest strengths as leaders. Our culture is the strongest foundation to our success and to the success we aspire for others.

- 1. Begin working on empowering your identity as an Aboriginal person and/or a Torres Strait Islander person, and strengthening your connection to our Black History and the Culture of YOUR Country.**
 - a.** Continue to educate yourself on the Black history of Australia both pre and post invasion and colonisation.

- b.** Become familiar with the United Nations *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* and use it as a living document to empower the work you do.
- c.** Keep up to date on the latest issues impacting Blackfellas which include Constitutional Recognition and the *Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory Act*. Make time to study and appreciate our history in action. Talk to Elders & seek out trailblazers, read, Google, Youtube, – you don't have to know everything, but as a leader it is important that you do develop a political muscle and have informed thinking and positions around the current issues.

***“When you belong you are strong,
when you believe you achieve!”***

Wendy Watego

2. Continue to develop a deeper relationship and respect for *Your Country, Your Ancestral bloodlines, and Your stories.*

- a.** Spend time on *Your Traditional Country* with your Mob as often as you can. Walk Country in bare feet and in silence so that you can feel and watch Her talking to you. Our modern life-styles have numbed us from listening to the sacred teachings of our land and feeling the heart-stories of our Country.
- b.** If you can't get to *Your Country* or you are unsure of where it is, that's OK. Find a special place in nature that you feel safe and at peace with, where you feel you have a sense of connection and belonging.
- c.** Hunt, gather and eat your traditional bush tucker as often as you can. This strengthens your spiritual connection and one-ness with *Your Country, and Your Mob*.
- d.** Start your family tree if you don't already have one. Or start collecting your family stories and histories, especially the powerful and positive ones that will sustain you in challenging times.

3. Hang out with other positive Deadly Blackfellas who think like you, and build strong empowering relationships.

- a.** You will know whether relationships are empowering by how you feel – whether you feel energised by them, or whether you feel heavy, flat and drained by them.

- b. Create your own Leadership Bank of Blackfella role models and study them – their strengths, and their challenges – remember they are human too.

Include Family Leaders, Community Leaders, National Australian Leaders (*eg Lowitja O'Donoghue, Noel Pearson, Patrick Dodson, Mick Dodson, Jackie Huggins, Marcia Langton, Linda Burney, Aden Ridgeway, Cathy Freeman, Gracelyn Smallwood, Bill Lowah, Mick Gooda, Warren Mundine, Charles Passi, Nova Peris, Eddie Mabo, Gary Foley, Jason Glanville, Les Malezer, Kirstie Parker, Leah Armstrong, Tiga Bayles, Mary Graham.... and the list goes on*) and World Leaders (*eg Nelson Mandela, Barack Obama, Martin Luther King, Oprah, Malcolm X, Colin Powell*).

4. **Design a physical expression (painting, drawing, song, sculpture.....) of your own modern day Creation/Dreaming Story which captures your values, beliefs, and philosophies and connects you back to *Your Country, Your Mob*. Let your creative juices flow.**

- a. Place this object somewhere where you will see it often. This will powerfully anchor your identity and connection back to Your Country and Ya Mob.

Build Your Leadership Capacity

1. Seek out for yourself an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander mentor/s who is in a higher position, or who has had more experience than you (this includes the wisdom and life experiences of Elders). Look for someone who has got the kind of results you want to accomplish or who can empower you to successfully navigate your way around the workplace and Blackfella politics.
2. Seek out a coach who can work with you to;
 - a. develop a life or career plan
 - b. keep you accountable to fulfilling on your vision and plan
 - c. support you when you hit a wall
 - d. teach you strategies for overcoming challenges
3. Become a life-long learner of leadership and make it a lifestyle. Look for Indigenous specific and mainstream training and education opportunities to support you mastering your craft.
4. Make a list of all your leadership strengths, gift and talents and concentrate on improving each strength by only 1%. Enjoy the magic that unfolds as you begin working from your strengths.
5. Become an avid reader / researcher. Leaders are readers. Ensure you include reading books by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors.

6. Two muscles that you must build continually in order to be a self-sustainable and highly effective leader:
 - a. Your capacity to communicate with intention and impact.
 - b. Your emotional intelligence muscle.

On behalf of STARS, I acknowledge you for taking time to read the first in our series of *“The 7 Ugly Truths Killing Indigenous Leadership - and What Can Be Done to Stop It.”* We appreciate that the first Ugly Truth *“The blacker you are, the dumber you are and the poorer you are, the more Aboriginal you are,”* is not an easy read emotionally. We hope however, that it has opened up for you a new perspective on why we do the things we do as Blackfellas who have leadership responsibilities.

We welcome your feedback on our Facebook page and we will keep you posted via Facebook and our blog as to when we release our next report on the **2nd Ugly Truth Killing Indigenous Leadership - “Australia is the lucky country...the land of a fair go!**

References:

- “Bringing Them Home” - National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families
- “Black Lives Government Lies” Rosalind Kidd. 2000
- “Elders: Wisdom from Australia’s Indigenous Leaders”. Recorded by Peter McConchie. 2003
- “First Australians” Video. Produced by Rachael Perkins and Darren Dale. 2008
- “Generations of Resistance, Mabo and Justice”, 3rd Edition. Lorna Lippmann. 1981
- “Indigenous Australia for Dummies” by Professor Larissa Behrendt 2012.
- “National Anti-Racism Strategy”. Australian Human Rights Commission. 2012
- “Racism: a Driver of Ill Health”. Article – Weekend Australian. July 27th-28th Page 20. 2013
- “Racism: a major impediment to optimal Indigenous health and health care in Australia”. Article Published in Australian Indigenous Health bulletin Vol 11. No 3. September 2011.
- “Racism in Aboriginal Australia”. Creative Spirits website.
www.creativespiritis.infor/aboriginalculture/people/racism-in-aboriginal-australia.
- “Racismnoway” Paper . Anti-racism education for Australian Schools. 2013.
- Social Justice Report 2012. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner. 2012
- “Taking Back Our Spirits: Indigenous literature, public policy and healing” Jo-Ann Episkenew