

Title: **BENDING TO DYSFUNCTION, BENDING TO THE PROBLEMS**
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The point of the note is a short one: we must be careful to ensure that whatever we are doing with policies, strategies and projects, we do not 'bend down' to the dysfunctions or problems we are trying to address.

Too many of the programs and strategies that have failed have done so because they have not maintained high standards or high expectations. Instead, in attempting to 'understand' the problems, they end up accommodating or acquiescing to the problems. Indeed they end up perpetuating the problems.

When faced with egregious dysfunction, we can feel that the 'reality of the circumstances' requires us to 'lower our sights' and lower our expectations and standards. We must assiduously maintain standards and expectations that are premised on functionality, not dysfunctionality. If we treat situations and people on the basis that they are dysfunctional, then dysfunctionality will continue.

One example of bending to dysfunction: Because school attendance has been a longstanding problem in indigenous communities in Cape York, it has been proposed that the school week be reduced from 5 to 4 days. The teachers/educationists who proposed this (apart from the prospect of teachers enjoying a longer weekend) argued in favour of the 4 day school week because attendance was particularly bad on Fridays, because of Thursday night/Pay Day binge drinking. Apart from being self-serving on the part of teachers, this proposal was a classic example of people 'bending' to serious problems (non-attendance, binge drinking), rather than confronting them.

When we introduce programs or strategies that have been successful in other situations, they may need to be adapted and adjusted to the circumstances of the community we are working with.

But we must be careful to distinguish between 'adaptation/adjustment' of programs and bending the programs downwards by 'dumbing down', lowering expectations and lowering quality.

Bending down of programs often happens in the *implementation* of what, on the face of it, looks like a good and potentially useful program. This is why so many official policies and programs might be un-objectionable, but do not succeed in practice: in their implementation the policies or programs are bastardised.

Culture is often invoked as a justification for this lowering of expectations and standards. It will be invoked by indigenous community members as well as those developing policies and delivering programs, as a justification for not upholding rigorous standards

that apply in the mainstream. We must be careful to ensure that we are not unconsciously using culture as an excuse for failure, poor performance and under-achievement.

This is one of the reasons why the ‘culturally appropriate’ ideology has become such a problem in indigenous policy and practice – and why our educational and other reforms are premised on *a comprehensive critique* and questioning of nostrums around ‘cultural appropriateness’. Too often, the truth is that whenever anything is said to be ‘culturally appropriate’ it is of a lower standard and expectation than that which may be ‘culturally inappropriate’. After all, why is ‘cultural appropriateness’ never invoked as a justification for higher standards and higher expectations – and higher levels of achievement, rather than lower? Beware whenever the words ‘culturally appropriate’ are used: it is usually an alibi for low standards and dumbing down.

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