Government agencies, NGOs and corporations often refer to ‘changing culture’ as a means to improve service delivery, remaining relevant, increasing profit or better reflecting the expectations and diversity of the community. But to change a culture it is necessary to actually understand what the culture is. This is a problem because having been born into a culture we tend to take its strictures for granted. A BNHCRC project in north Australia offers insights which are useful for all community engagement.

CULTURE – HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT

What which we commonly think of as ‘culture’ is the ‘tip of the iceberg’. Schein1 portrays the levels of the components of culture and the extent to which they are readily understood. Most people give little thought to the ‘basic assumptions’ that influence their behavior.

FROM VALUES TO BASIC ASSUMPTIONS

Many Australian’s get that Yolngu people have very different social relations to the ‘main stream’. Anthropologists have documented the ‘Skin’2 system. The system describes who you can marry. But a deeper understanding of that system can give insight into ‘basic assumptions’.

Skin relationships have a set of prescribed rules about responsibility, trust, formality (or not) and proximity. These rules are embedded into every day life. They lead to behaviors that may seem unusual to non-Aboriginal people.

UNDERSTANDING ENGAGEMENT

To get to ‘square 1’ the parties have to understand themselves and each other. This can take time and involve action as well as discussion.

References: