

Kin cities

Sister city relationships tend to be played out at an executive and community leader level, but they can have an organisation development benefit too.

Having lived a fairly international life as a young migrant then older traveller, I'm predisposed to value internationality and the concept of 'local to local'. I've also enjoyed the benefits of one particular sister city relationship, that between the City of Port Phillip in Melbourne Victoria, and the City of Obu in Japan, half an hour from Nagoya.

These two have had a unique sister city staff exchange program for 16 years now. On an annual rolling program that hasn't missed a beat, an Obu staffer comes to Port Phillip one year and vice versa the next.

The exchange is unique in that this is not a fleeting visit. You remain on the payroll, and are provided with a home, a vehicle and a desk at the respective municipal offices. Getting the gig is like applying for a job, with selection based on proposals for a community project, the key deliverable for the privilege, not necessarily in one's line of work.

By the time we go to press, Port Phillip will have flown its eighth exchange staffer to Obu (with a sustainability project in hand), which makes eight per city since 1997.

In some quarters, it's tough arguing for a sister city budget, and it's not just the cash. Some fear the junket accusation, others simply aren't sure what to do with a sister city agreement.

The latter circumstance barely gets past an annual visit of dignitaries, perhaps a MoU and courtesy correspondence. In this case, the trips probably are junkets. Displays in reception centres and exhibitions are a step better, but I really wonder how much interest one's sister cities generate, beyond school visits and the like.

The language of sister cities is about getting to know each other, cultural sharing, even economic connections. My question is how do these translate into change and learning?

Personal experience testifies, there's nothing more powerful than being there a while and having a role in the sister community. Then you can absorb and understand the nuances, and perhaps find better ways to connect. A week's paradiplomatic visit every second year is not going to build a functional relationship.

Admittedly, the Port Phillip Obu sister city experience was out of the ordinary. Few sister city programs invest that much in engagement and experiential outcomes.

Over the years, exchange staff have conducted a variety of projects in

each other's communities, from environmental to artistic, culinary to childcare. At the same time, they are imbedded in a relevant department, treated as a team member and get to learn how things are done in an entirely different workplace setting.

There's no doubt that the personal benefits of living and working in the sister community are enormous. Professionally, it was a challenge that gave me new skills and heightened confidence, which the organisation made very good use of in the years after.

You only have half a sister city relationship without sister workforces.

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