



## A life-changing business

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*Photography:*

*Video:*

In building his \$10 million communications business, Indigenous entrepreneur Michael McLeod has shown drive and determination to break the cycle of dependency into which he had fallen. He has also found time to help countless other Aboriginal business leaders enjoy professional success along the way.

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When Michael McLeod was just two years old, he was taken from his parents and made a ward of the state. By the age of 10 he had started using drugs and alcohol, and while he managed to complete his Higher School Certificate studies, by his mid-20s he was a drug addict and living on the streets of Sydney.

McLeod's story could very easily have ended there. But today he is the CEO of a technology and communications company with annual revenue of \$10 million and some 100 clients, including some of Australia's top corporates.

McLeod's story is testimony to his desire to better his situation and break the cycle of dependency.

"I never wanted to return back to where I was in life – I wanted to do something that stood out," McLeod says. "Like all Aboriginal people, community is part of my psyche. And getting clean and sober gave me a chance to think about what I could do."

**A NEW START**

McLeod is a member of the Ngarrindjeri Monaro people of Southern New South Wales. He is also a member of what has become known as the Stolen Generation – a generation of Indigenous children who were separated from their parents by government authorities.

In his 20s, he was subsisting on handouts and the occasional grant, but it was while spending time in rehabilitation that he was asked the question that led to his turnaround.

“I had a counsellor ask me what I thought were the triggers that kept me locked in a lifecycle of substance abuse,” McLeod says. “And it was such an amazing question. Suddenly I had this sense that I wanted to be financially independent and not reliant on anybody.”

“So I made a very crazy decision early on in my recovery that I was going to reject all welfare in all its forms. I thought I’d start my own little business.”

This was the 1990s, and the emerging new field for entrepreneurial businesses was the internet. Knowing little about technology – or even running a business – McLeod started Australia’s first Indigenous-run Internet Service Provider (ISP), in the Illawarra region of New South Wales.

“For me, art was really important, so when I saw the internet came with building web pages, I loved the artistic approach to it,” McLeod says. “But I also loved the software coding concept. I fell into a space that I found to be so fascinating.

“And at that time everyone was experimenting, so there were opportunities to explore for everyone.”

But as with so many early internet entrepreneurs, McLeod’s foray into online business did not have a happy ending.

“Someone once told me that failure was the mark of a true entrepreneur,” McLeod says. “I wish someone had told me that earlier, I might have had second thoughts. I stuck at that business for six years. I learnt a lot about web development and technology, but I didn’t make a dime.”

Despite that initial failure, McLeod still describes that period as the most empowering time in his life.

“It opened up the world for me. Suddenly I had aspirations to succeed, I had dreams for the future and a vision for what I wanted to try and achieve, which I never had when I was out in the streets. It was a completely different mindset. And that empowerment was extraordinary.”

## **SPREADING THE MESSAGE**

It wasn’t long before McLeod was introduced to the next person who would have a significant impact on his life – entrepreneur and businessman Dugald Russell.

“The moment that we met I realised that Dug was the one who would provide me with the opportunity to grow as an entrepreneur and business person,” McLeod says.

In 2004, they established McLeod’s second business, Message Stick, a provider of communication services such as audio and videoconferencing. The relationship with Russell filled a vital gap in McLeod’s own capabilities.

“I got the experience of a person who knew the corporate sector and would assist me in navigating my way through the business sector and understanding what it means to be the owner and CEO of a business,” says McLeod.

It was also a time when many Australian corporations began engaging with Indigenous Australia beyond just their corporate social responsibility programs. McLeod wrote to the CEOs of approximately 200 top-tier Australian corporations to advise them of Message Stick’s services, and was surprised by the response.

Ten of them signed up as clients in Message Stick's first year.

"That was an amazing change in my life, from living in poverty to being comfortable," McLeod says. "I started getting emails and phone calls from many other Indigenous business owners asking how I was being successful in engaging the corporate sector.

"So Dug and I sat down and asked what we could do to support other Indigenous businesses. Because my own journey has been about what I can give back to my own people."

## **FROM LITTLE THINGS BIG THINGS GROW**

In 2009, McLeod and Dug formed the Australian Indigenous Minority Supply Council (AIMSC) – now rebranded as Supply Nation – to connect Indigenous businesses with corporations and government agencies. McLeod says more than \$170 million has flowed through to Indigenous suppliers as a result of Supply Nation's work.

"There are about 300 certified Indigenous suppliers who are certified on the council," McLeod says. "Their lives are irreversibly changed now because they are engaging with the corporate sector.

"They are able to send their kids to the best schools, they are able to buy their own homes, and they can sign up to private health cover. It is all the options that other Australians probably take for granted, but we are now becoming far more aware of within Aboriginal Australia."

Message Stick now lists 100 of Australia's top corporates and government departments among its clients, generating around \$10 million in annual revenue. McLeod's ambition is to double Message Stick's customer numbers.

He has also partnered with peak body Indigenous Business Australia to increase Indigenous employment within his own business.

"I would like to take Message Stick to a level in the next five years where I can step off and bring in a young Aboriginal person to become the new CEO," McLeod says. "I want to be able to give something back, in the sense of growing the business and employing more Aboriginal people.

"But I look back and go 'wow' – it's been an extraordinary journey."

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