# Issues of Collective Leadership in Building a Business with Indigenous Artists: An Arts Management Case Study

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#### **Abstract**

The potential growth of the Indigenous creative industries has attracted government funding, cultural tourists, and arts managers with a strong interest in cultural democracy and, more recently, an interest in business models for these artists. This paper documents the case of Arilla Paper, a creative enterprise in Queensland, Australia, where a group of Aboriginal women, worked on making paper from natural materials, to create a sustainable arts business. Sections of the business manual developed for these women, together with primary and secondary data supporting the Indigenous creative industries, are presented. The paper concludes that success in such ventures requires a change in understanding of Indigenous cultural ownership on one hand, and business practices on the other.

#### **Key words**

Indigenous Artists, Cultural Integrity, Business Development, Creative Industries.

#### **Introduction –The Indigenous Creative Enterprise**

The case study for examination is an enterprise called "Arilla Paper". The enterprise was the result of a group of Aboriginal women who had a natural artistic talent, and through training workshops developed the beginning of a fully recognisable paper mill production process. Located in Mount Isa in the north west of Queensland, Australia, the group of women, known as Arilla Mob A (literally translated as a mob of women), found nourishment and respect through working together. They incorporated their traditional cultural values with the dream of a sustainable creative industry. With the support of a local welfare agency, the local government, a university community service grant, and government arts grants, the women were trained in paper making, product design and business development. They gathered spinifex grass, eucalypt leaves, earth ochres, and recycled shredded local government documents to mulch as pulp. The new baths, presses, and drying frames for the paper were housed in a disused museum workshop. A kiosk on site was an ideal retail outlet. Cultural tourists, government departments, and local residents were motivated to buy the product. A business development model was prepared, and although some commissions were met by production runs, the project did not achieve the dream, because of management, leadership, and cultural ownership issues.

This case explores these issues in the context of the business building manual prepared for the Aboriginal artists as the means of engaging commitment to the business model for the enterprise.

## **Cultural Ownership and Commercialisation**

Australian Indigenous art belongs to an ancient culture where the land is the source of inspiration. It is not surprising then that the Indigenous arts and cultural industry in Australia was, until recently, largely a cottage industry, unstructured and unsupported by a sustainable infrastructure. The production of art in many traditional Aboriginal communities is linked to community involvement, thus community ownership or cultural ownership is dominant. Language, culture and tradition are integral to Aboriginal peoples' sense of identity. As the custodians of sacred stories, the Elders represent the community, the identity and their Indigenous integrity. This is an example of collectivism, where "people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, often extended families (with uncles, aunts and grandparents) which continue protecting them in exchange for unquestioning lovalty" (Hofstede 1995). Collectivist societies emphasise the group over the individual. Opinions are predetermined by the group, and obligations of harmony and respect are to the group, not one individual or leader. In a sense, the leadership in an Indigenous or Aboriginal community is collective. No one community member will make the decisions for the others. All decisionmaking is consensual and deferred to the community. Traditionally this conserves the culture of the group or community. But commercially this inhibits appointment of a manager, accountability and reporting within business regulations, and difficulty under Corporations Law for registering and carrying out the creative enterprise.

Throsby in his analysis of economics and culture, points to the standard self interest that drives an economic consideration, and to the collective goals of much cultural production and consumption. He states that "... many artistic goods and services are produced by group creativity where the outcome is a collective effort acknowledged by the participants as having value or meaning beyond that which could simply be attributed to the totality of the inputs of the individuals involved" (Throsby 2001). The values of the Aboriginal community are cultural integrity and the manifestation of the spiritual belonging. They are not economic values, and are anathema to entrepreneurship and business development. Indigenous creative enterprises invariably require non-Indigenous partners and support.

The tension between conservation and commercialisation is discussed by Graves in his 2005 publication *Cultural Democracy – the arts, community and public purpose*. He advocates support for traditional cultures in the larger economic, political and social contexts. While Graves is focussing on respect and "breaking down the phobias that surround the strange customs of every outsider group" (p. 212), he identifies the imperative that most western governments have recognised for Indigenous arts and artists: "access to artistry, a safe place to practice, the stimulation of encounters with other cultures, and long-term sustaining support". Mindful of the need for both conservation and commercialisation, the Queensland government in Australia committed itself to "develop and implement a learning framework to assist Indigenous artists throughout Queensland to develop skills in industry development and marketing" (*Creative Queensland* 2002) as the means of achieving cultural democracy, or, a satisfying relationship between conservation and commercialisation for Indigenous artists. The government priority was to improve economic growth and preserve and profile Indigenous art and culture to the nation and the world.

This agenda furthered 1997 research on the Indigenous cultural industry in Australia which identified the following issues for the development and marketing of Indigenous artists:

- Indigenous people are committed to their art, painting, carving or storytelling, because it expresses their deepest respect for their land.
- There is increasing interest from both the overseas and local markets in acquiring Indigenous arts and crafts products.
- Remote locations and isolation make it difficult to coordinate Indigenous creative industries.
- Indigenous artists lack marketing and business practice skills, as well as knowledge in the latest art techniques and materials.
- Indigenous communities are not educated in intellectual property or copyright issues (Bell 1997).

A survey in 2002 with the general public in Brisbane on attitudes and to and participation in the arts including Aboriginal art, and focus groups with participants and non-participants in Aboriginal art productions identified motivations and barriers to participation, and likely consumer demand. The telephone survey was conducted with 600 respondents over 18 years of age, who were not regular arts participants. The results showed that one third of respondents had attended a theatrical production featuring Aboriginal performers in the last three years, and that 75% of respondents were interested in experiencing Aboriginal theatre. Respondents indicated a strong interest in learning more about Aboriginal culture and heritage in general. The focus groups gave more depth to this data. Members said they would participate more if they had more information, and that they wanted to engage in a learning experience. They expressed a curiosity for Aboriginal arts and a sense of pride in the artistic products that Aboriginals make and are often used to represent Australia. In particular they talked about the uniqueness of this art. Given that the 'new consumer' and the 'cultural traveller' also want a unique learning experience and authenticity, this primary data supported evidence that a market existed for Aboriginal arts products purchased at the point of production by the artists. Mount Isa, where the artists in this case live and work, is experiencing a cultural and arts renaissance. These factors pointed to an opportunity for the Mount Isa Arilla Paper venture.

Success in the creative industries is usually associated with entrepreneurial leadership. The authors of the *Entrepreneurship in the Arts and Cultural Sector* project report in Canada, identified three characteristics of successful entrepreneurs: belief in themselves, unrelenting focus on their business, and a sound appreciation of their own strengths and weaknesses. These characteristics define individualism, not collectivism. They are not normally characteristics in Aboriginal leaders, nor in Aboriginal communities. Thus the challenge for this project was how to build a sustainable Indigenous creative enterprise, managed entirely by Indigenous people.

These reports on the Indigenous cultural industry in Queensland, statistics on demand for Aboriginal art products and cultural tourism trends in Australia, together with literature on cultural democracy and collective leadership provide a context of need and demand for Indigenous creative enterprise, but not a model for a business enterprise. This is the task that followed.

# The Beginning

In Aboriginal communities, women in particular, "foster the arts and cultural practices as a means of improving daily life" (Bell 1997). Strategies by governments in Australia to overcome social problems in Aboriginal communities often focus on arts and craft activities as a means of revitalisation. This is how the Arilla Mob A first came together. The Aboriginal women had attended pottery and painting workshops for over twelve months through the support of the local Salvation Army welfare agency, and had shown artistic talent and development, and a change in their quality of life. With a university community service grant, paper making materials and workshops were provided to this group of women. They were invited and transported regularly to the paper making workshops by the Salvation Army, as a service for their care and skills development. Their continuing interest engaged others in participation, such that it was deemed possible to develop a commercial enterprise out of this activity. At that point questions of cultural ownership did not arise. The Salvation Army support, together with the local government, was sufficient to believe that this approach was the best way forward to give the women a sense of purpose and achievement. Business development workshops commenced at the workshop site, now known as the "paper mill". Most of the women were illiterate and contributed to discussion in a manner which respected and deferred to the contribution of the elders of the tribe, called "Aunties". The visualisation of the ideas, models, and decisions was represented in graphics with icons for key steps in the process. As volunteers and as Aboriginals, their cultural values were the highest priority. They agreed on a vision statement:

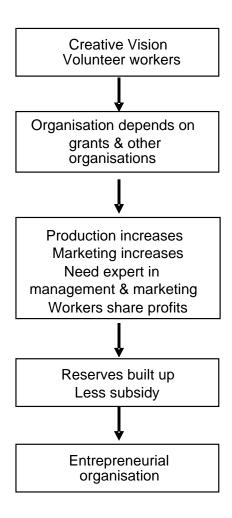
Arilla Paper brings together women, the plants and the spirit of the land around Mount Isa to make unique Indigenous paper.

# From Dependence to Sustainability

Arilla Mob A were welfare dependant, but had a vision to make and sell paper, and create employment and resources for their community. The business workshops were designed to help them understand how they had to move from dependence on welfare and arts grants, to independence in creation and productions, to a sustainable business.

Typically, arts organisations move from a creative vision towards a bureaucratic and management focussed design. As the organisation grows and becomes more confident, it is likely to become more entrepreneurial. In the early stages, a non profit organisation is dependent for its operation on government grants or loans, or on the support of other established organisations. Many of the workers in the organisation start as volunteers who share the creative vision. As the organisation increases production and marketing activity, the workers shift from volunteer status to paid employees and develop the need for management and marketing expertise. The organisation is now less dependent on subsidy and support. It can build up reserves of artists and workers, and reserves of money for reinvestment in the production and artistic development. As the reserves and production increase, the organisation may consider new areas of activity and become entrepreneurial in focus. This is the growth cycle for a nonprofit arts organisation. As a creative enterprise, it must earn enough money from sales or other financial capital to employ and sustain the artists and management team. Sustainability is the point where artistic effort is sufficiently supported by audiences or customers, such that the arts organisation or art form is sustained for the next generation (Radbourne 2002).

Figure 1: Life Cycle for an Indigenous Creative Enterprise.



It was planned that Arilla Mob A would go through this life cycle as it moved from dependence to a sustainable business in three major stages of growth into an active and profitable business. These stages have no definite time period in which they have to be completed. What is important is that the owners' business knowledge and the business operations grow at a pace that is natural, achievable and successful.

# Figure 2: Business Growth Stages

| Stage 1 | Generate business idea  |
|---------|---|
|         | <ul> <li>Determine goals of business and partners</li> <li>Workshop business needs</li> <li>Determine goals for business growth</li> <li>Determine goals of partners for the business</li> <li>Find supporting partners</li> </ul>  |
|         | Determine requirement of the business and its products     Determine products     Determine skills and human resources needed for production     Determine location and equipment requirements  |
| Stage 2 | Establish partnership   |
|         | <ul> <li>Establish Partnership Agreement</li> <li>Decision-making process</li> <li>Roles and responsibilities of partners</li> <li>Evaluate business progress</li> <li>Develop products</li> <li>Establish sales and distribution processes</li> <li>Evaluate business progress and revenue generation</li> </ul> |
| Stage 3 | Incorporate business  |
|         | Incorporate business  |
|         | <ul> <li>Evaluate business progress</li> <li>Evaluate existing products</li> <li>Evaluate sales and distribution processes</li> <li>Evaluate business progress and revenue generation</li> </ul>  |
|         | Expand business and product opportunities   |
|         | Evaluate business progress  |

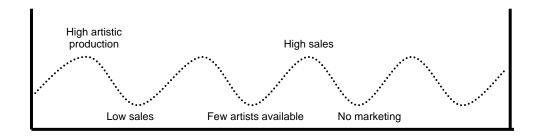
In the business workshops Arilla Mob A were advised to find experts in management and marketing in order to build the business. The business building involved building up reserves of money and people, so the business could grow and tryout new ideas, new products and new markets.

# **Managing Production Fluctuation**

Employment and a commitment to the business outcome is very different from being collected from home daily to attend paper making workshops. There were days when some of the women were distracted from attending by other events in their community. Their understanding of the productivity value diminished in relation to the values of sharing, working together, and nourishing their spirit and creative activity. They needed to understand how their participation, or lack of, affected production and sales.

Similarly, they needed to understand that other factors affect production. Arts businesses rely on creative people, changing market demand, and diverse cultural environments. There is a natural tension between creativity, the business, and the people who run the business. Artists are not always able to create or produce. Customers may come in groups, and not a steady stream. Outside factors affect the ability of the owners and managers to fully focus on the business every day. In reality business activity looks like this.

Figure 3: Production Fluctuation



At this point in the project the strengths and skills of all the women were acknowledged. Who were the artists. Who were the organisers. Who were most productive. The need for leadership and management emerged. Production had to have daily recording. The resources for paper making had to be collected and stored. Decisions had to be made on which paper products were being made each day. The small kiosk next to the building called the paper mill, had to be set up as a store to sell the paper. A system of collecting money, accounting for sales, paying expenses and distributing any profits had to be approved.

Most of the women were artists. One had a management position in an educational institution in Mount Isa, and another was a nationally recognised artist. The supporters in welfare and local government were willing to help. It was agreed that women, external to the core group of Aunties, would manage the production, marketing and sales.

#### **Building the Arts Business**

The business workshops involved developing a mission, a stakeholder analysis, a product analysis, a production process model, a human resources and reporting model, a legal structure, and a marketing plan. The simple diagrams and discussion with the women were

recorded on large sheets of paper and then transferred to a workbook or business building manual that would be their reference point for the activity.

The business building manual contained information on the action and implementation for stages of organisational growth, managing production fluctuation, the role of the artist, developing a partnership, establishing the business name and logo, product development, marketing, sales and distribution, accounting and finance, and the legal entity of the group.

The manual acknowledged that Arilla Paper was founded by the Elder women in late 2002, as a business established by Indigenous women and open to all women from all cultures to have the opportunity for employment. The first stage of building Arilla Paper was a partnership of volunteers working towards the establishment of a paper production business. This partnership would be transformed into an incorporated business when the partners were ready. This manual was described as a living document, designed to assist the women through the various stages of business development from initial idea through start-up business and into an incorporated business. As a living document it would instruct and guide as well as be the repository for the goals and plans to grow the business.

The manual was divided into twelve sections. Each section contained a checklist for the tasks to be completed in the Start-Up phase of the business along with worksheets and/or guides for completing these tasks. This Start-Up Checklist and Guides were followed by an Incorporated Checklist and Guides for use in moving into and operating an incorporated business. As tasks were completed, they were checked off and dated to show completion.

The following figure shows how a familiar image was used to describe the business activity.

Figure 4: Business Building Manual Sections

#### Gathering the wood

- Business Start-Up
- Products
- Production
- Marketing
- Sales and Distribution
- Intellectual Property (IP) Management

#### **Setting the fire**

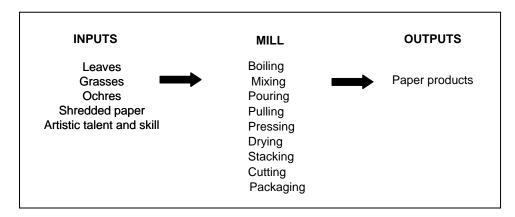
- Partnership Agreement
- Council (Governance)
- Legals
- Human Resources
- Accounting and Finance
- Incorporated Constitution

## **Production at the Paper Mill**

In order to broaden the Arilla Mob A's artistic perspective and formalise their creative enterprise, the art making process was described in business terms, such as supply and demand, inputs and outputs, products and values exchange, and product analysis.

The function of a paper mill was presented as using the supply of artists and the raw materials to produce paper products that can be sold to customers. The artists and the raw materials are inputs. The paper products are the outputs.

Figure 5: The Paper Mill



The role of artist was defined as someone who creates a work of art that is an expression of that artist's imagination, talent and skill. The artist's work is recognised as a work of art by other artists and by customers or people who wish to buy or acquire the work of art. It was important to place the artist as a professional with a job and a value for the women, so that as artists, they were not merely involved in welfare activity. They then knew that artistic expression has three dimensions: self, peer, and customer/audience. The Arilla Mob A artists created for the pleasure of self expression, as well as for the appreciation of the mob of women artists, and for the customers who bought their work.

Professionalism was explained in the following way.

Professional artists must learn, practice and establish their skills. All artists have an inborn talent to create works of art. This may be in painting, dancing, story telling, weaving baskets and cloth and mats, carving wooden objects, making designs or jewellery and ornaments, or making paper. This talent is developed through training and practice. Most artists improve and learn new artistic techniques through workshops and training sessions. Skills develop as artists try out ideas and new techniques. Greater skill leads to personal satisfaction, higher recognition by friends or peers, and greater appreciation by customers. More detailed and complex products are developed through greater skill. Fewer mistakes are made and material is not wasted. The Arilla Mob A accepted that they should always be learning new skills to improve the quality and diversity of their artistic products.

# Marketing

From emphasis on the professionalisation of the women as artists, the business workshops and the business building manual shifted to marketing and product analysis.

Marketing the arts is the process of linking the art with an audience. For Arilla Mob A, marketing is linking the paper with a customer. It is an exchange of values. Arilla Mob A have something of value – the paper products. This is to be exchanged for something of equal value – usually money. But the paper might be exchanged for raw materials, or free rent for the kiosk or paper mill, or for accounting services, or workshops.

# Figure 6: Value Exchange

#### What do you value?

Paper products
Training and skills of the artists
Time to make the paper
Costs of raw materials
Your special story

#### What does the customer value?

Money
Good quality art
Unique features of this paper
Indigenous arts guarantee
Uses of paper (placemats, letter writing paper, cards)

To get the maximum exchange of values, it was proposed that Arilla Mob A should seek the answers to all of the following questions:

- How do we maintain the quality of our paper products?
- How do we make sure our paper products are unique?
- How can we tell our customers that our paper products are authentic?
- Who are our customers?
- Which different customers want which different products?
- How should we communicate with our customers?
- What price will our customers pay for our products?

The following tasks were identified to help the women answer these questions.

#### 1. Design the logo

Your logo makes you unique. It tells the customer a lot about you. Everyone will recognise your products from your logo. It should be the stamp of quality.

#### 2. Write the Arilla Paper Story

Your guarantee to the customer is that this paper product is the authentic work of Arilla Mob A. Aboriginal and Indigenous artists can be very proud of their artistic work. It is special. The customer values this. You want them to read your story. It is part of the paper and is a real way of linking your values with the customer's values. Every piece of paper art must be sold with the story to translate its special qualities.

# 3. Determine your market segments or groups of customers

Different customers have different values. Different customers want different products. Your customer groups or market segments might be tourists, local businesses, art lovers, corporations or government departments who use a lot of paper, local people who write letters or cards, and other artists. You may not be able to manage all market segments at once. Start with one or two. Find out as much as you can about that market segment. This is market research.

#### 4. Create the product

Arilla Paper products are made from leaves, grasses and waste paper which are processed and coloured with earth ochres. Skilled paper artists hand make all the paper products in a paper mill in Mount Isa. Each product is designed for its unique beauty that reflects the land, the people and the spirit of Aboriginal Australia. The paper products include paper sheets for writing and printing, paper cards for gifts and notes, business cards, name tags, decorated paper, and artists' paper.

It takes training, skill, artistic talent and hard work to make the products. It takes time and effort to gather the raw materials. Some products are more difficult to make than others. Some customers want to see the paper products being made. Different customers use the products in different ways. Arilla Paper products are unique. They tell a story about grasses and leaves and ochres of the earth.

The product therefore has many parts. The art experience is central. The paper is the product. All the values of this paper are also part of the product that the customer buys.

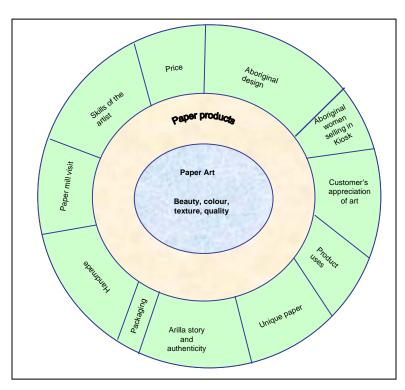


Figure 7:
Arilla Paper product

This discussion helped the women to understand the extent of their creation, and the potential of their business dream.

# **Cultural Integrity**

International demand for Aboriginal art has created a market for mass produced souvenir level products. While this may be controlled and offer high employment, there is a risk that the 'authenticity' and the integrity of the Aboriginal artist is trivialised. Arilla Paper art belonged to the Arilla Mob A because this was their tradition. They were also generous in encouraging other women to participate. However, part of the business model addressed moral rights.

Moral rights give individuals who create material the exclusive right to be attributed as the creator, to take action if the work is falsely attributed to someone else, and to take action if the work is distorted or treated in a way that is prejudicial to the individual's reputation. Moral rights are distinguished from economic copyright rights, which for artistic works comprise the exclusive right to reproduce the work in material form, publish the work, and communicate the work to the public. Indigenous communities must adopt several strategies to encourage compliance with traditional processes and standards of dealing with cultural property. Codes and protocols have been set up by government agencies. Under Trade Practices and Competition and Consumer regulation, the integrity of creative works embodying traditional community knowledge and wisdom can be protected. This section on Indigenous communal moral rights is especially important to Arilla Mob A. The women were informed and it was included in the business building manual as policy and a checklist.

#### Governance

The governance tasks needed for the start-up business during the partnership stage were to determine the role of the partner, establish the decision-making process, establish the partnership agreement, the reporting process and a management structure. During the business workshops, the roles were discussed at length. There was general agreement that someone had to take responsibility for production, someone for marketing and someone for accounting. A structure was drafted and the reporting, communication channels and controls understood. The legal advisor prepared the partnership agreement for the Aunties to sign. Further visits to Mount Isa and discussions always presented a problem, manifested by someone's absence, or illness, or a logistical issue of a locked room or lack of transport. The agreement was not signed.

Arilla Paper was ready to be formalised as a business with a manager and a plan and to move on to the next stage of growth towards independence. But the collective leadership could not depart from the traditional ownership, and hand ownership for decision-making to an individual manager from within.

#### Conclusion

The case concludes with both positive and negative outcomes.

On the negative side, two years after the business workshops and model were delivered, there is no sustainable creative enterprise. The venture stalled five months after establishment of the business model because of lack of capacity to manage from inside. There was a need to move

from dependence on the social welfare organisation support services towards sustainability. The two issues of 'time in grant' and leadership were the hurdles that the women had to overcome. The women could not resolve internal leadership nor acknowledge the need for management expertise. This became evident when they failed to sign the partnership agreement. Despite all the good intentions of the government policy and the training by the skilled artists and business development consultants, the project has not achieved Stage Two of the business development model.

On the positive side, there were some important developments. Arilla Paper obtained an Australian Business Number (ABN) which is necessary in all business transactions in Australia. The ABN must be shown on all invoices and orders. Bank accounts were opened for Arilla Paper with the assistance of the Mount Isa Council (local government). The Mayor was an enthusiastic supporter of the Arilla Mob A and devoted Council resources through a Community Development Officer to help in the management of the project. The women are continuing to produce paper products for government offices and for tourists. Their income is minimal, not enough to cover their costs.

A feasibility study has been conducted in Mount Isa on the museum facilities on the hill where Arilla Paper is located. There is potential for these facilities, Arilla Paper, and the nearby award winning Outback at Isa tourist attraction, to create a cultural tourism hub in Mount Isa. Within this infrastructure, Arilla Paper could be sustained.

The greatest success was an Australia Council funded exhibition of their work in October and November 2004 in Brisbane, about 1200 km south of Mount Isa. Government funding enabled a curator to prepare the exhibition, Craft Queensland to house and promote it, and two of the Aunties to fly to Brisbane for the opening. Thus, via acclaim and grant support, the women are continuing to develop artistically, and to build integrity for their community.

The Arilla Mob Paper Mill is the result of a dream. It has taken a group of women who had a natural artistic talent, through training workshops, into a fully recognisable paper mill production process.

Arilla Paper is an acknowledgement of the Elders and the women who are the Arilla Mob A, as artists, producers and industry makers. They have shown courage in daring to hope that their dream of having a paper mill business could become a reality. Arilla Paper is built on friendship, respect, caring and understanding of the basic needs of food, shelter, and belonging. From these basic needs was forged a recognition of talent and a dream. This dream, while based on the traditional spiritual stories of the Aboriginal people, is also a dream of an innovative future of a sustainable creative industry in Mount Isa.

The main concerns in this case are that government policy and financial investment do not ensure practice and outcomes. For Indigenous creative industry ventures to achieve profitability, and even sustainability, there needs to be a cultural shift by the Indigenous arts workers in understanding business practice, acceptance of new ownership structures, new values and new goals. There also needs to be wider acceptance by funders and government agencies, that Indigenous creative enterprises cannot achieve sustainability in the short or medium term. Arilla Paper might take five to seven years of ongoing support to achieve the dream.

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