Disability Done Different: Episode 8

Frank Crupi on… Getting a Life

Podcast transcript

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Hosts:	Roland & Evie Naufal
Guest:	Frank Crupi

Intro

Maia: This is Maia Thomas. I am the DSC podcast producer and I just wanted to give you a quick rundown of DSC as an organisation before we get started. DSC is a team of 33 people across Australia, all working together to bring specialised training and consulting expertise to providers in the disability sector. Our focus in on helping providers to survive and thrive in the NDIS and our purpose is better outcomes for people with disability.

Start of Interview

Evie: Welcome to Disability Done Different, Candid Conversations. My name is Evie Naufal and I'm joined in the studio today by the second best Director of Disability Services Consulting, Roland Naufal.

Roland: I'd have to agree with that.

Evie: [Laughter].

Roland: Who's the best director?

Evie: Of DSC?

Roland: Yes.

Evie: That would be Vanessa Toy. Your wife… and my stepmother.

Roland: [Laughter].

Evie: Our guest today is Frank Crupi, the CEO of Milparinka and one of our favourite people in the sector. We've been wanting to get Frank on the podcast for a long time, haven't we?

Roland: We have. And it proved to be exactly as what we thought it would, except that he didn't swear as much as we expected.

Evie: Yes. Why did we want to get Frank on the podcast?

Roland: He's doing things differently, it is Disability Done Different, he's got a story to tell and a way of making it happen.

Evie: You don't meet many organisations like Milparinka and it's tough to put into words what's different about them. I think Frank's done a pretty good job of expressing it himself. We hope you'll be able to see what we find so special about them.

Roland: Yes, it's true.

Evie: Okay, here's what's going to happen now.

Dialogue over intro jingle:

Roland: Hello, and welcome to our podcast.

Evie: We are DSC. Your turn, you're the boss. Disability Done Different.

Roland: Disability Done Different.

Evie: Candid Conversations. I hope you're ready, because we're starting.

Start of Interview

Roland: So, 18 years as CEO of Milparinka, Frank, and you still haven't been able to get an honest job.

Frank: No, they've tried to get rid of me, but I just hang around a lot.

Roland: Cool. Before, Frank was CEO of Milparinka, he was in community health. He was in… what else were you in?

Frank: Council.

Roland: Councils and those sorts of things, but before that, it was in disability way back in the days of the institutions of Sunbury and Kingsbury. Like a lot of the older people, including myself, disability has somehow pulled you back in again. What's the attraction and why do you stick with disability for so long, Frank?

Frank: I think it's basically just the connection to people's lives. I like working in a place that isn't huge, Milparinka is not a big place, and I can still stay connected to people. A lot of the other roles that I had, people became numbers and were very distant from the

work you did. Whereas, with disability, I find you're able to stay a lot closer and connected and can touch people in different ways.

Evie: That's not the case in every organisation, but we know Milparinka are particularly good at keeping close. When we talk about an organisation that's doing well, that's got a good culture, that's got a close connection to people, we often talk about the distance from the CEO to the frontline workers. I don't think it's unfair to say that Milparinka has a particularly short distance there.

Frank: Yes, and it's quite deliberate the way that we do that. One of the ways that we do it is by understanding that there's actually no difference between the job we do. Most direct staff members maybe have the role of supporting someone to develop communication skills. I also have a role in helping someone develop communication skills because I have to ensure the capacity is there, so we all live on the same line of the job we're doing. We don't see that as a separate role.

Evie: Yes, I was struggling to ask you that question there, because what I wanted to say was, when we talk about organisations who do good "customer service", that's what it looks like, so I'm diving straight in with a word that I know you hate. You've pulled me up on it before.

Roland: More than pulled you up on it. Frank sent you home in tears, which he probably doesn't know.

Evie: [Laughter].

Roland: Tell us the story.

Evie: He didn't send home in tears, he sent me an email while I was already at home that put into tears.

Roland: Tell us about that.

Evie: I think it was probably two or three years ago. It was probably when I just started in the sector, I was doing some work with some of your managers, I can't remember exactly what it was. Some kind of NDIS 101 session. I said something along the lines of, like, "You know, it's how you support your customers. Oh - I won't say customers. No, I will say customers." Then I just carried on and nobody said anything. Then you sent me a long email that night about all the reasons that you didn't want me to ever use the word customer again and how it had been such a faux pas. And I felt a little bit sensitive about it.

Frank: Well, I'm sorry…

Evie: You're not sorry at all. [Laughter].

Roland: No, she still uses it.

Evie: I use it all the time.

Roland: She hasn't given it up.

Frank: Yes, but not with us.

Roland: Tell us what you've got against "customer", Frank?

Frank: Look, it's really that we work with people. We work with people to help them get a life, a life that they want. I don't necessarily think that they're coming to us to buy that from us or for us to sell that to them. We work in partnership with people along that journey. "Customer" just doesn't fit. A lot of words don't fit. I don't think "client" fits. I don't think "participant" doesn't always fit. People ask us, what do we want to call people, I say, well, people.

Roland: I want to combine a couple of questions both to Evie and to Frank. Evie, your first impressions of Milparinka and then, Frank, will you tell us about Milparinka. You were just speaking about your journey, your Road to Damascus moment about ten years ago over at Milparinka. Evie, putting you on the spot, do you remember?

Evie: It's a little while ago now.

Roland: Let me help you. The first thing we noticed when we rang Milparinka was Frank answered the phone. You've got the CEO answering the phone before we got there. When we got there, do you remember the receptionist?

Evie: No?

Roland: A person with quite severe disabilities. We're already experiencing something quite different to most other organisations we've worked with.

Evie: I can't say I remember my overall impression, but one memory that I'll probably always remember, and you might not want me to say this… one thing I remember is I had a meeting with you in your office, and somebody, one of the people you support came and knocked – I don't think she knocked on the door, I think she just came in. She was like, "What are you doing here? You left your coffee here overnight and now the room stinks." You told her, "Shut up, go away. I'm in the middle of a meeting." You often talked to people like that, to the consultants and to your staff. I was like, now, that's true equality. [Laughter].

Roland: Everybody gets abused equally. [Laugher]

Evie: Exactly. Everybody has the opportunity.

Roland: Tell us about Milparinka and the road to Damascus, Frank?

Frank: Well, Milparinka is a traditional, or has been in the past, traditional day service that provided supports to people in groups predominantly. Look, about ten years ago, I read an article from a lady called Deb Rouget, who many people will know. In that article, there was an interview she did, and she spoke about love, she spoke about valued lives, she spoke about excitement, she spoke about what people were doing in their lives, in the community. Not going for coffee but living lives where they were in

relationships with people, where they were pursuing their own interests. I was really taken by that article.

Roland: Can I just jump in, because I know where the story is going, but why that one article? There's been a lot of stuff like that over the decades, but this one reached out and grabbed you?

Frank: Because it wasn't full of motherhood statements. I know Deb and I knew that she was working with people at a very real level. That she was talking about lives that she knew and connected with. You could follow the storyline that she was telling. One of the things that we find is that it's always better when someone can tell you a detailed story, as opposed to just a few lines of rhetoric.

Roland: She told you a story that spoke to you authentically and it captured your imagination?

Frank: Yes.

Roland: It led to a very significant change in your approach and the services with which you work approach?

Frank: Yes, it did. We read the article, I made my managers read it, I asked them to read it. Then we walked around the building and we looked at people and we asked, why isn't their life as good as the lives we're reading about? Look, we came to the conclusions that we were probably getting in the way of those lives. We needed to do something different. The first thing we did different was got Deb to come and talk to us. That was like inviting the devil into your home because Deb really doesn't like group supports. There's no middle ground, so we started conversations about how we could be better in people's lives at that point.

Roland: All these years on, and we'll talk quite a bit as we go about the things that you're doing differently, you still have some groups?

Frank: Yes, we still have got some groups. A lot of people come to us and over the years, we've been learning to use the groups as stepping stones, rather than blocks where people sit forever. Sometimes people just won't come in to access the services because they can't visualise the story. They can't visualise the journey until they can trust us and have more conversations with us and other people at Milparinka.

Roland: One of the things about Milparinka, which I noted, was that you have a large number of attendees, but the centre is not where they are. You'll come in on any one day and the number of people that are participating in Milparinka is much larger than the number of the people that are at the centre.

Frank: Yes, but that in itself isn't a very good measure that we're doing something good. In part, it's because probably 30 percent of the people who now use Milparinka for supports never come into the centre, others, you're right, come into groups and then go out and do what we think is valued activities and others would come in and just go

out in group activities, albeit, small group activities, but they're just doing activities during the day. They've obviously got some value to those individuals.

Those group activities aren't life-creating. They're providing someone with a service rather than the opportunity to develop a life. Whereas, a whole lot of other people... It's a spectrum. We have the groups that are really activity-based at one end, and right along that spectrum, we have people who are taking part in what we would call valued life-building opportunities.

Roland: I want to go back one step and just talk about one person at a time, what Milparinka is trying to achieve and what the goals are. Maybe if I could do it in terms of, imagine Evie has suddenly said, "I've had a gutful of doing this consulting/online training work", and she's got a job running an old-fashioned service in the country. She thinks, "I'll talk to Frank before I go", Frank, what would be your three tips for Evie about getting services right, now that she's the boss of a country service for people with disability?

Frank: Look, I think that one of the first things I'd say is immediately rethink how you measure success. Understand that success can only be measured in the context of each individual person telling you their life is fulfilled, or their life is better, or they've got connections. As soon as you change that, then it's going to focus you on talking and looking at individuals. The other thing is, I would say, adopt a rule that says, "nothing happens without me", so that there are no conversations about a person and their future without the family or the person being involved in it, because somehow you have to convince the staff that they are not the smartest people in the room. It's a real problem for disability services where people think, gosh, yes, we know. And we don't know.

People know their own lives. Of course, they know their own lives better and what they want. Then I'd say, invite someone in who hates what you do who has a better idea. Not someone who just hates, but someone who wants something better to challenge you. Then because what you're going to do there is have conversations that make it better. Then you can think about your mechanics later.

Evie: In my work, training support coordinators, Frank, I mentioned to you outside, I've noticed in the last year that a lot of the training content, like what people are demanding and the questions they come with are decreasingly about how to actually talk to somebody about the life they want to live and how to put things in place. It's becoming more of the technical detail about what to say in the planning meeting, what people can and can't spend their money on, and what item to use in the price guide to do that.

I was saying to you, partly when I try to talk about talking to people about their life vision and goals and how to put all of that stuff in place, people are like, yes, I get it. I know that they don't get it. I know that they don't get it because I know that I don't get it. If I had a person with a disability in front of me, I wouldn't probably be able to have the conversation and be able to know what the next steps are about what does a life of meaning look like to you and what do we need to do to get there?

What's really struck me about the people that I've met from Milparinka is that they do get it. My question to you, Frank, is, can you teach it or do people come to Milparinka already with that mindset or a set of values? How much can you teach and how much is already set in stone?

Frank: I think that it can be taught, but you've got to – I think what you've got to do is, you've got to understand who you're looking for and who can be taught. For example, one of the things you may not know about, is that we've had over the years some exceptional staff who are able to work with people to identify their life interests, what they value, what their passions are, then identify the steps that makes sense for that. What we did was, we went away and went to a management consultant, not a management consultant, but management psychologist and got him to do assessments on those people to try and understand what were their values base that enabled them to do those things. They were things like… and the things that came out was someone who didn't need to be in control and was able to shift their thinking very quickly in response to somebody. Someone who's able to have a passion and share it, but then put that passion aside, so that someone else can live their passion.

What they've shared with them, what they've shown them is not their passion, but their ability to talk about it. We, when we interview for people, look at those characteristics because I think it's really important that you get the right people from the beginning, when people come to us through employment, we don't look for disability qualifications so much because, look, what we'd say is, you know quite enough to do enough damage to people. Sure, some people come in with disability qualifications, they're fantastic, of course, but we look for people who have those characteristics who are expansive in their thinking but can then take that expansive thinking and see opportunity.

Roland: Frank, I want to jump in there, because you said a couple of things. You're looking for people who can let go of control and people who are flexible. I've been involved in a number of programs, one, which was a parent support. It wasn't a parent support; it was a parent taking control of their lives. I probably trained 300/400 workers in this method of facilitating parents to take control of their lives. I reckon about five of them were able to let go of control.

When they get in tricky situations, when it gets stressful, they fall back on their quasi qualifications, like a social work qualification or whatever, that's what comes out because they're stressed. In that moment of real crisis, they need to let go of control and they can't do it. If you're looking for the rarest bird available as someone who can let go of control, someone who's really flexible, and you're paying them 30 bucks and hour or less, you've really got to look outside the box.

Frank: Yes. You do have to look outside the box. It does get hard with that level of pay. Of course, some people pay above Award and stuff like that. The other thing, too, is, with all respect because we've had the same issue, you're training the wrong people. One of the things, you can have the right staff and look, we, like anybody, we get right staff and we get some wrong staff and we have to do some corrections. The people you really need to train and educate are families.

We spend, a bit less since NDIS, but up to a couple of years ago, we spent 50 percent of our annual training budget on giving families an opportunity to be educated. Not educated about what a service looks like and what it should be, but educated about, hang on, your entitlement to be right, to make demands, to say, and say, "I want". That's been the biggest driver, not the clever staff. The families that we educated by having people like Michael Kendrick and Debra Rouget and other people and just workshops and come in and talk about life and what it looks like.

They're the ones that move the staff better, because they come in to say, "That's not good enough, I want this, I know that life is bigger than what you're offering me." That's, for us, that's much more important than training staff. When we train parents, we bring staff into the room, so that they can hear and share the conversations. For example, one of the things we've done traditionally is send people to, or give people the opportunity, to go to the life of the Belonging Matters conferences that are really family-based.

We would send, not send, but I'd give the opportunity for 11/12 families to go there. We'd also send 11/12 staff to sit with them, so that when the families got excited about what they're hearing, they could talk to the staff about it and put pressure on, so the staff could do that. Getting the right staff is only a small part of that picture.

Roland: Yes, I just want to put a plug in for Michael Kendrick and Deb. Michael Kendrick, if you Google his name, K-E-N-D-R-I-C-K, you'll find a huge body of work. He's been coming to Australia for how long, Frank?

Frank: Well over 25 years.

Roland: Doing a huge amount to support people to become person-centred, one person at a time. Tragically, you told me before, that we can't afford to bring him over much more with the NDIS?

Frank: Well, the NDIS doesn't leave a lot of money for training.

Roland: Yes and Deb Rouget, R-O-U-G-E-T. She's Australian-based and doing great work. Google Deb and Michael and you'll learn a lot just from reading their work and the conferences that Deb's running.

I want to go back to families. One of the things that I really love about Milparinka and I want to ask if you're still doing it is, you had one of your family members, somebody who had been there for a while, as really the first point of contact when families come into the service to greet and help families navigate what they're about to experience. Are you still doing that, does it still work?

Frank: Yes. Of course, we're still doing. I just had a meeting with Brenda earlier this week. It's a little bit different. It's partly as you described it, but it's partly a little bit different. Brenda Sherman is a family member who… Brenda and her husband Bruce have helped their daughter Kim who's got very high needs to live a life in her own home in the community with a whole lot of really valued roles and activities and Kim has more friends than I do, which isn't hard. [Laughter]. She's surrounded by people who bring value and relationship to her life.

What we use Brenda for is a little bit to navigate the system, but to have conversations with families, so that they can see what opportunities they can make happen, to see that it doesn't have to be just a group-centred. To see what when we have families that come to us and they say, we're awful to come to because if people come to us and say, "Well, what can you give us?" We say, nothing. You know, we don't know you, tell us who you are and what you want. That's really hard for some families. Brenda can really help people identify that, so it creates this new search for people into a broader life.

Roland: A genuine soft-point of entry. We're talking quite a bit about the NDIS, which we don't always do. Frank, you've talked about the pressure it's placing on people with complex needs. You've talked about some of the pressure it's putting on families, but when you and I spoke the other day, you were talking about the pressure it's putting on you, taking you away from your first love.

Frank: Yes.

Roland: Not your wife, who is your first love, sorry, your second love.

Frank: She'd argue that. [Laughter]. Look, it's taking me away from talking to people. I guess I, as a CEO, have a slightly different role to a lot of others. I get the opportunity to spend, traditionally, a lot of my week talking to people about their lives and where they're heading. People should have that because in the end when it comes to the organisation, if something goes wrong, I'm the person people are going to come to for big decisions. I should know people. I should be able to understand the context of life, what that decision makes.

The NDIS has taken that, it's taken incredible bureaucracy and it's stolen that. What we have now are people like me and Claudia Veneras who works with us and Sam and stuff, spending a lot of time on computers counting. One of the things we prized ourselves on over the years, we know is a critical success measure, is to traditionally not talk to people about money but talk to people about lives, because when people talk about lives, they're thinking, but money doesn't think, money just buys. It can buy a lot of rubbish, especially in terms of disability services. It shifted the conversation to money, and it shifted our focus and our work onto computers. It's really scary because what it does is, it takes away the people with the most experience from people's lives, which is…

Roland: Is it a transition, is it something we're going through you'll get out the other side?

Frank: No, we're working hard to identify ways to move past it. There's no doubt about that. I think that with time, we'll move past it. That's us because we're prepared to make that effort. There will be others that will make that effort, as well. I think the residue it's going to leave in terms of organisations' ability to focus on people's lives rather than the mechanics of what you can afford and not afford, it's going to be pretty horrendous.

Roland: One of our first NDIS consulting gigs was with Milparinka, we came out and we worked with you. I remember the overall conclusion was you guys are running pretty thin, pretty lean, you're very focused on one person at a time. You're going to find this a lot easier a transition than most of the other services. So, were we full of shit?

Frank: No, but I think everyone has found it hard. We've found it hard, as well. We were going to find it easy because we, for the last ten years, have been giving people their own money and saying, look, it's your money, we'll just hold it for you, tell us how to spend it. That didn't translate to the NDIS. The NDIS is much more category-based. As we'd say to people, here's a round circle, here's your money, where do you want to use it to get a life?

The NDIS comes along and says, "Well, here's a row of boxes and there are categories that you fit into, spend that money to get a life." It doesn't generate the same. There has to be… the conversation of money has lost that overall meshing that needs to happen for a life to happen. Life is confusing and complex, and people change their mind.

Evie: Yes, it reminds me, what you're saying, we have this research I've heard of, we'll have to find the source and put it in the show notes, is that contrary to what you might think, that category approach, which I think is a bureaucrats way of trying to keep more control over the money. The research would suggest that when you look at other countries who have done individualised funding, that the less restrictions you put on the way the people can spend their funds… for example, to have one bucket that people can choose to spend how they want, the less fraud you end up with. The

more trust you give people, the more they end up being trustworthy, which is so interesting. We've heard that that evidence has been circulated fairly widely at the NDIA and the bureaucrats rejected fairly whole heartedly. It's so counterintuitive.

Roland: Does it go with your experience, Frank, the more trust you give people, the more trustworthy they are?

Frank: Yes. Beforehand, we were able to give people like that, a global bucket of money and say, okay, where is the best outcome for you? We saw outcomes, it's not like we can imagine them. We saw people getting the jobs, and we saw people moving out of home, and we saw people building relationships with like-minded people rather than just people who share a disability. Those things happen because families are trusted. Of course, families are trustworthy, they love their children, they love their sons and daughters, they love their brothers and sisters.

Evie: What I've seen earlier this week, I was speaking to a group of support coordinators, and we were talking about how you can spend your NDIS funds. In particular, we were talking about short-term accommodation funding, which is now what we would have once called respite. You can use that funding to pay for a full service, which includes food, support, activities, and the accommodation while you're there. There's nothing stopping a person from using that funding to go to an Airbnb, go to a restaurant while they're there, have the support worker come with them, and go to an activity that's not bowling.

When you present that to people, they're like, what? With NDIS funds? It's like, what are the assumptions that are going on there, that's stopping people from engaging with that being a realistic possibility? Does the service have to be bad and boring for it to be NDIS funded? There's always this outrage that NDIS funds can be spent on something that we might want to do.

Frank: Just to comment on that. What you're describing, in people going out, we do. People stay over in a home and they go out for the night and they enjoy themselves, the families go away. Then they spend that money in a much better way, in a much more cost-efficient way, too.

Evie: Yes, it's cheaper.

Frank: It's part of the problem I think when you talk about why does that happen? It happens because you've gone to a sector that was basically non-creative and said, be creative and then given them boxes to be creative in and expect good things to happen. That's maybe a stretch of the imagination. They don't think that. If you want creative people, you've got to give them space to be creative. It's not going to start with disability services, historically.

Roland: Speaking of creativity, Frank, one of the things I've heard you say recently is, organisations that are tinkering at the edges, changing shape a little bit, giving themselves a refresh or a rebrand and expecting the organisations to be different but still expecting people with disability to fit into their service, do you remember?

Frank: Yes. I think there's no question. I don't mean to sound pessimistic, but I do mean to sound challenging. I think that the problem with disability services in general is that there has always been, and I don't think it's changed in the NDIS, in fact, I think it's becoming worse on the NDIS, there's always been a universal commitment to the words. There has almost been a total universal failure to put those words into practice. I think that to any large extent, of course, good things happen, but not enough.

I think that, yes, there is a lot of tinkering and there is a lot of people, what people are better at now, I think, from our experience, because we do talk to a lot of services, and people come to us and there will be a lot of people coming from a lot of services to us at the moment, what people are really good now is the skill is marketing. The skill is not helping someone get a life. When you talk about that tinkering, that's what we see.

Roland: Yes.

Frank: We see people say, we are here to help people be people, but then they set rules that say: No, you're not allowed to buy us a Christmas present and we're not allowed to buy you one because that's a service provider/provider relationship. No, you're not allowed to go to the shops and buy me something on the way to your work. Literally, these are rules that people have who have these sorts of mottos. Why do they need to happen? Because of risk, I suppose.

Evie: What I think about, for me, one of the biggest tragedies for the failure for the words the translate to action is the "I" in NDIS, that insurance approach. When we look at what the insurance approach is all about, it's about investing now to save later, it's not just about having this year-to-year approach, it's really looking at what would make the biggest difference in someone's life.

Roland: Capacity building.

Evie: It's capacity building. With a very mathematical approach to it, how can we make it so that people need less support across their life, paid support? When I think about the kind of work that Milparinka wants to do, those kinds of conversations about getting a life, as you say, the kind of work that a support coordinator can do if they do it really well, we just don't see that being funded because that lifetime approach - that's in the words - that insurance approach just isn't being translated because what's happening is, we're ending up with that tinkering again with the same people who worked for the previous funding systems working as planners for the NDIA and for a variety of other

reasons, we're ending up with that year-by-year approach still being applied in planning. People not having that lifetime perspective applied to their current plans. Not to get too technical about it, but that drives me absolutely crazy.

Frank: It is. Look, the insurance aspect of the NDIA is not a bad thing, it's a great concept.

Evie: It's a beautiful design.

Frank: You don't invest by just funding people's needs of what's broken. You invest by funding the things that they're able to be passionate about and their interest so that they can pursue. Also, you invest in the people around them being able to spend time thinking, being able to plan, being able to educate, being able to go and search communities for the opportunities. We spend a lot of time when someone tells us, I want to work in a café. Well, that might be a café that's got lots of noise, or particular types of work, or focus on being not crowded at certain times of the day. You've got to walk around and find those places.

Roland: We actually did when we were there, you took four or five supports workers to a corner and told them to go away for a couple of hours.

Frank: Yes, I still do that.

Roland: Yes, so tell us about the exercise.

Frank: It's really about getting people used to finding opportunities for people. What we would say to people is, look, talk to someone about what it is they want in their life. In this case, we're looking for people who may want to be connected to a local community, they may want to go to build a relationship in a club, they may want to work in a different type of shop, or they might want to be involved in the council. Then we sent out staff loose on the corner and say, look, go and find something that you think suits. What you learn is that not everything fits. You don't go to five shops and ask, hang on, can you create an opportunity for someone with us? You go to the one shop that says, can you create an opportunity for us because we've got someone who we think will really fit in here, because this is what you do, and this is what they want. That's a really good experience for staff to do, but you can't fund it now.

Evie: Isn't that funny how it's unique because it's, again, for me, one of those examples where we wouldn't think it's unusual to do outside of a disability context. If I think about applying for a job, any time we have a job and we have people apply and it's just so obvious when they've just sent something generic, that they're just throwing out their net really wide. You're like, this was not a fit.

Then when you get the email from somebody who says, "I really love DSC, this is what I think is pretty unique about you. This is why I think I'd be a fit." It's like, yes, fantastic, let's start a conversation. It's so funny when you translate that to disability and say, we look for

an opportunity that's going to be well-suited for both parties and then we try to pursue it. It's like, wow, that's an interesting idea.

Frank: Look, we have always been surprised. We don't usually accept it. You say it's unique, but we've always been surprised and very disappointed when people come and say that some of the stuff we do in people's lives to do more than go to a café for a cup of coffee, or go to a movie, but to actually find a life and pursue interests. People tell us, gee, that's exceptional. We think, what a load of rubbish. It's just a life. It's just taking steps forward. It's just wanting better in people's lives.

Roland: Frank, your Road to Damascus story is about Deb Rouget, mine is about a guy called Hans Becker, a Dutch guy who just blew me away with the way he was reinventing aged care in the Netherlands, in Rotterdam. He took highly institutionalised settings and turned them into community-based bars and restaurants and places full of light and life and movement. People wanted to be there, they came from outside the community to be a part of Becker's vision, called Apartments for Life. I'm sure they still are.

Anyway, going back there a couple of times, I spotted Becker's role as the CEO, 3,000 residents, probably that many staff. We generally have a large number of staff for that many residents across 13 buildings. When we walked through the buildings with him, he was constantly playing policeman as well as coach. He'd see a chair that was an institutionalised looking chair and he would flip. He would say, "We don't have chairs that look like this. We have chesterfields. A chesterfield cost half as much as this stupid chair. Get it out of here." He'd see things. He was constantly policing everything he did because the institution has a way of reinventing itself.

The forces to institutionalise, to codify, to make people transactions are stronger than they are to be free and take control, like you're talking about. I also noticed that with you, you've got quite a bit of the cop about you at Milparinka. You're constantly policing the forces at work to go back to being non-individualised, non-one person at a time, is that unfair?

Frank: No, it's very true. It's not accidental at all. We have a very strong philosophy that leadership starts at the top. It's surprising how much leadership stuff doesn't. When we look at leadership, I don't think of myself as a CEO who runs an organisation, I think of myself as a CEO whose job is just like anybody else's, to help someone get a life they want. We're constantly measuring by that standard. That's what we want all of our leaders to be doing, is to pursue that.

For example, an example of leading from the top is, that we focus, pay a lot of money out for communication aids and communication training because we know that people can't tell us what they want unless they can communicate. We've seen massive changes in people because of that capacity. One of those main was, Key Word Training.

Now, I went and became a qualified Key Word Trainer. I could run workshops, but I can't now.

Never to be a trainer, but so that people could see my interest, and that when I can talk to a direct care staff or a family member about signing and the impact of it, and how to go about it at a layman's level and a more professional level. It makes a massive difference because people know you're interested, the expectation of that role travels right through the agency.

Evie: Yes, I'll always remember when I came to Milparinka to meet your Communications Manager, expecting that person to be a marketing manager. Finding out, no, in fact, she was responsible for implementing new communication skills programs.

Frank: Yes.

Roland: Frank, you've been speaking so much about get a life, while you were talking, I quickly Googled, one of my favourite Leunig poems. I just want to read a couple of lines out of it. It's called *A Life*.

"Anyone can get a life. Anyone can lose it. But who will dare to inhabit the thing and use it?"

Do you know that one?

Frank: No, I don't.

Roland: I reckon that could be the motto of a lot of what you're trying to do at Milparinka. I can't tell you the number of times you've just talked about getting a life.

Frank: Yes. Well, that's what we do. That's interesting.

Roland: I will finish with one more question, which is, the corruption of language. You were talking about capacity building.

Frank: [Sigh].

Roland: Frank just sighed if you didn't pick it up on the mic.

Evie: Speaking of corruption of language, this has so far been a very PG podcast for a Frank Crupi podcast.

Roland: Yes, he's behaved himself.

Frank: Yes, I have behaved.

Evie: Well done, Frank. Now corrupt us.

Roland: Talk to us about the corruption of the language you've been trying to use. Everybody is doing capacity building, what's different about yours, Frank?

Frank: When we started on our journey, I guess we were trying to find words that people didn't mistake for the motherhood statements that are around the disability services at the time. It's really, in the end, yes, of course words have been, the meanings have been lost and it's been used to mean different things. In the end, because so much of our focus is about talking directly to individuals and families and one person at a time, that while we are frustrated by people saying capacity building and all that sort of

stuff, we are able to explain, we have the time, when we get it, to explain to people what the words mean.

Like, individualisation to us doesn't mean the same thing for everybody. It means knowing who you are, what your interests are. Let's find what you value and who you want to be as an adult and let's follow that. That will tell us what the individualised support is. I think the biggest problem at the moment with language, with that stuff, is there are places like the NDIS coming along and saying, yes, you're getting individual support, and people thinking that's individualisation. There is just millions of dollars falling off cliffs, where people are just walking to the edge of the cliff with their money and throwing it over the edge, because they're getting individualised supports where people are coming into their lives, they might be there for six months.

They might be there for three years, but when that staff member leaves, there's no change. The person still ends up going to the same place for coffee, or the same movie, without new relationships, without different connections in their lives and stuff. I think that people calling that individualised is a bit rich.

Roland: Frank, 40 years, Sunbury, Kingsbury, a very long history in disability. The recent NDIS. What keeps you awake at night around your career these days?

Frank: Not much. [Laughter]. Probably the thing I'd be most worried about is people with high complex needs and the one-to-one supports. People who we know struggling intensely and have nowhere to go and less and less people are taking them at the same time. At the same time, can I say, that for people with really complex needs, we've shown that they're able to get jobs, and they're able to take part in boarder community things. We've got people with extremely high needs. When I say complex needs, I'm not saying they just need looking after. I'm saying, it's about creating a life.

Roland: It's not just an anecdote you pull out of your bum for one success case?

Frank: No, we've got a lot. We could tell you stories.

Roland: Cool. Thank you, Frank.

Evie: Thanks, Frank.

Frank: Okay. Thank you.

End of Interview

Outro

Evie: You've been listening to Disability Done Different, Candid Conversations. Roland and I have been joined in the studio today by Frank Crupi, the CEO of Milparinka. We're going to link some of those resourses he talked about in the show notes. We'll also

put a link to our website, where you can find some fantastic, if we do say so ourselves, NDIS resources, and you can also subscribe to our weekly newsletter.

End of Audio