

Disability Done Different: Episode 25

Jennifer Cullen on...being a proud Aboriginal woman and CEO of
Synapse

Podcast transcript

Hosts: Roland & Evie Naufal

Guest: Jennifer Cullen

Start of Audio

Roland Naufal

Welcome to Disability Done Different Candid Conversations. Hi Evie.

Evie Naufal

Hi Roland. And hello to our guest today, Jennifer Cullen.

Jennifer Cullen

Hi there.

Roland Naufal

It's great to have you here. So Jennifer, you and I met I think it was 2015, which is like over five years ago in Mount Isa talking about rural and remote issues for the NDIS. It was in the early birthing days and I remember thinking, Holy shit, who is this woman? She knows so much detail. You were able to answer so many questions from the podium, which weren't even meant to be your questions. You were talking about rural and remote and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, but you knew so much detail about the scheme. I only ever knew one other brainiac at that stage and that was Luke Bowsher, who knew so much about the scheme. So I wonder if you could just introduce yourself to the audience and give us a bit of background to who you are and how you come to know so much about the NDIS.

Jennifer Cullen

Hi Roland and Evie, I can't believe that five years has marched on so quickly, and I certainly do remember our time up in Mount Isa. And I think it's fabulous because it's one of the first discussions that we had up that way in central Western Queensland about what is this thing called the NDIS. I remember you Roland remarking about the fact that I wasn't wearing shoes back then, and five years later, I'm still not wearing shoes. I'm a very proud Biggera Wakka Wakka woman. Wakka Wakka is my

grandmother's country. If you leave Brisbane, travel up four hours north and chuck a left, that's her country. My poppa's country from Brisbane is eight hours up the highway, chuck a left and you're at his place. Apart from being a very proud Aboriginal woman, I'm also a very proud CEO of Synapse Australia limited. A little bit about me.

Roland Naufal

And over the years, we're going to talk quite a bit about what you've done. There's a whole lot of intersectionality and discussion about intersectionality at the moment in terms of Aboriginal people disability, but you're at the intersection of being a female CEO, working in a brain injury organisation, also being looked to a lot for advice around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Sometimes does the pressure seem like a lot for the expectations that are on you in the role?

Jennifer Cullen

Oh, some days I reckon it's a big yes, and other days I reckon no. I think some of those expectations come from myself, but also the expectations of being an Aboriginal woman who is talking about business when it's appropriate when I can. And I also think it's an interesting time to be an Aboriginal female CEO leading a non-indigenous organization, particularly around disability. Definitely.

Evie Naufal

You were in your early thirties when you took up the role of CEO at Synapse, 10 years ago now, right, what's changed in that time?

Jennifer Cullen

That's correct.

Evie Naufal

A lot has changed in that time, I won't ask you what's changed, but maybe I'll ask what do you wish you knew then that you know now?

Jennifer Cullen

Oh Evie, you know one of the biggest things I wish I knew then that I know now, I wish I'd paid attention to this wonderful male mentor that I had. The biggest thing I wish I knew back then was intergenerational teams. The different perspectives that different age groups bring from people in their twenties, right up to those who are just about retiring. And what I mean about different perceptions is different concepts of time and place, and the value of those who have walked before me and those who come after me. One of the things that I can remember learning is I was trying to do a piece of work about, you know, brain injury and change and housing, and I can remember sitting down and people saying to me, no you'll never do it, you can't do this, you can't do that.

The wisdom of time from, you know, nearly 20 years later is that in order to enact change, yes, it is the people who agree and want to walk their lives alongside you, but if you want to affect change, you actually have to walk alongside the naysayers. Those who say it can't be done, it won't be done, you'll never do it because therein lies the threads of wisdom when you hear it won't happen. They're the ones that are giving you the heads up on system impediments on things that won't be able to change, you know, who you haven't spoken to or got their opinion from. So looking back, I would've spent more time in building across Synapse different age groups into our workforce, but spending a lot more time with people who said we couldn't do stuff because therein lies the wisdom of things that we weren't listening to. Does that make sense?

Evie Naufal

Yeah, totally.

Roland Naufal

It does. Yeah. It's a left-field question, but I still want to ask it, because I used to work in the aged care space Jennifer, and I talk about is this the way that you want to live when you grow older? And one of the things, it took me about a decade to learn is you don't have the perception of how you want to live when you grow older until you grow older.

Jennifer Cullen

Yeah.

Roland Naufal

And is that part of what you're saying is that you can imagine that, you know, when you're 60, which I am, that there's not much point in living when you're 20 or 30, but when you get to 60, there's a lot of point.

Jennifer Cullen

Yeah, exactly.

Roland Naufal

It's overstating it, but it's very hard to, you're saying two things. It's very hard to understand what the future self is going to be like and it's also very hard to understand people who come from different opinions, which impedes our ability to be effective.

Jennifer Cullen

Absolutely, absolutely. And to bring it back, I guess your example on aged care, but one that comes to mind so very quickly recently is we were doing some work with the NDIA around workforce capability. And one of the things that I say very clearly is that the community services sector are full of girls. We're women, you know, we're mothers, we're aunties. But when I cross that with the fact that brain injury in our country occurs at higher rates to men rather than women, we need to be developing a workforce strategy and capability around how to attract young males. We know that, you know, between the ages of 7 and 24, that's the highest risk for young men to get a brain injury. If you're a young man and you get a brain injury, do you really want, the average age of a female support worker to be 48 years old? It'd be like hanging out with your mum. So that's what I'm saying is, you know, we've got to look at different ways and different perspectives and actually look at what people want, rather than hearing my voice all the time. We'd be wanting to hear from young men who are in the industry about how they provide support and what is it, the skills that they bring in terms of capability to supporting young men with brain injury.

Evie Naufal

At DSC we firmly believe as well, we say sometimes that leadership comes from everywhere and if you look at, you know, the makeup of DSCs team, even the most junior, well junior's not even really the word we'd use, but even some of the youngest people in the team have the most influence. I'm a manager, I'm 29, turning 30 next week and we find that different people who join us or work with us find that more or less challenging to work with me or to take direction from me at the age that I am. And I guess I'm wondering in your experience of bringing in these intergenerational teams, if you identify anything that makes it work with others, you know, when you face that resistance, I guess, do you have any advice?

Jennifer Cullen

I think that one of the reasons that we don't, in the early days when I started at Synapse from the Brain Injury Association of Queensland, yes, definitely, but I think I've taken the approach of

Aboriginality and my culture and, you know, respect and build on trust. So for example, in the white man's world, I'm the CEO of Synapse, but when I go to different places across the country, and we have a significant number of indigenous employees who are older than me, then it comes inverter, I'm the child. They are our leaders, they are the governance. So we've taken this concept and framework about the role of different age groups across our Aboriginality and have embedded that perfectly into a non-indigenous organisation.

Roland Naufal

Can I ask you, Jennifer, to take this to a systemic level. We're talking about diversity and we'll always need to talk about how services are culturally appropriate. What are some of big systemic changes you think we need in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander space in the NDIS?

Jennifer Cullen

Look I still believe, you know, and I'll say this, there has been the good things about the NDIS and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, we have elevated a narrative around disability and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in this country. I think that's a really good thing, but I still have concerns that when we talk about choice and control as a white construct, we don't actually apply it in the same way for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. So they might say choice and control, and we'll say self-determination. Give us the right as families of people with disability of our people with lived experience of disability, to be the custodians in determining how they enter the plan, on what pathway, how they receive services, how SIL and SDA are constructed. And to give them the opportunity as we do with other Australians who are participants of the NDIS, I think that's really important, extremely important.

We're the custodians of our own design and our own future, and grant us the opportunity to build, like we do some of the existing reference groups that we have, like, you know, the Intellectual Disability Reference Group, or you know, the Contemporary Innovation Accommodation Reference Group. I think that would add significant value and build mutual respect and understanding right across the agency to understand more broadly the application of how we live culture, not just through an NDIA plan.

Roland Naufal

I remember the early days, and we would have been talking about it back in Mount Isa five and six years ago, is that the NDIS has been devised around an individualistic model, that's what it is. And Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture is a collective, a community-based culture, and we were saying, and I won't put words in your mouth, but we were saying at the time this is not going to work. And that has proven largely true, I think and I'd be interested in your comments, Jennifer, because it's of the individual versus collective culture and a bunch of other things, is that reasonable?

Jennifer Cullen

I think that's incredibly reasonable, and I still think it's the same. The whole premise of individual ideology does not work, not only just for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, but for many other cultures within Australia. And what I find interesting is you've got this inherent tension between it's about the individual, the individual, the individual. And yet if we look at the outcomes framework, we're actually talking about a domain that is about the sense of belonging, about being included in the everyday life, about how we can actually meet using the NDIS and the NDIA as one small element of the national disability strategy. But we've made it about an individual, not what I call the Sesame Street model who are the people in your neighbourhood.

If I look specifically around my family and decision-making, it's collective, you know, there might be a significant number of people who turn up at a planning meeting and there are notions of an authority and a methodology in which few can speak. And sometimes it might be someone who might speak on

behalf of the person with the lived experience of disability until such point, as for example, trust between the planner or the LAC is granted. I'm not saying that's the same for all Aboriginal communities, but I'm using that as a case in point for what happens in the context of me and my family.

Evie Naufal

That's fascinating, Jennifer. How do you, you're on the Independent Advisory Council too, which I know in your work has a large focus on the self-determination aspects of NDIS. How do concepts like self-determination fit in with what you're talking about?

Jennifer Cullen

Oh, look where I think it's, we've spent a significant amount of time since 2013 looking at, you know, some of the papers that we've provided advice on. And I see that issue of self-determination being embedded in papers that we've done on early childhood, early intervention. I see it also embedded in how we respond to specialist disability accommodation and certainly, you know, there was a paper around enhancing social and community participation, which talked about particularly about inclusion being more than just one person going out and doing something. It was actually building that sense of belonging, not about how many times I was out in the community as such. So I think some of those themes have been woven quite significantly into the work of the independent advisory council.

Roland Naufal

So can I go somewhere with the self-determination piece. So the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander strategy of the NDIS talks about. I think it's trying to recognise self-determination by saying, we will wait to be invited, this is paraphrasing and probably not all that fairly, we need to be invited into an Aboriginal community before we can begin to be effective and prima facie that seems like a reasonable place to be. But when we've talked to lots of Aboriginal communities, they're saying we're overwhelmed by a bunch of other things, including health, health issues and accommodation issues. I think waiting to be invited could be a strategy that leaves a lot of communities unserved. Do you have a comment on that, Jennifer?

Jennifer Cullen

Oh, see I've got a bit of a smile on my face because I also think waiting to be invited is a good reason not to try. And what I mean by that is waiting to be invited is not a full stop, it is a process. So it's about having those connections, understanding, asking for permission, but being, belonging. So say for example, it has taken Synapse close to two and a half years to be invited, but this means to be invited to conduct business. So we have been going and being, sitting, listening, learning until the elders and the traditional owners saw that we were committed to that community. And I think that's the, you know, the complete difference in how non-indigenous people take the wait to be invited, whereas I say from my experience in the communities, it's a process to get invited.

Roland Naufal

That's wonderful. It's really good to finally understand where the catch in that was, because it's pretty plain that it's resulting in not a lot of action, but you've given us a way forward, which is great. Does Synapse work, I've watched you from a distance and you've done some marvellous stuff. You've done Communication in Aboriginal Artwork. You've done a bunch of interesting brain injury projects in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander space and in the mainstream space. What are a couple of the things that you're most proud of over the last few years Jennifer?

Jennifer Cullen

I'm most proud of our housing projects in far North Queensland. My colleagues and my elders and those who know me very well will laugh, but I have to say it. I call it nine years of dreaming, from the

moment of conception until we actually opened the doors was nine years. And back to your point, that's around, you know, the wait to be invited stuff. Yes, there's a whole bunch of systemic issues in there, but we have in 2017 opened the doors to Australia's first Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander housing support for our people with very complex disabilities, including brain injury. What makes it unique is it's architecturally designed, approved by the two tribes of Cairns. It is supported by 98% Aboriginal and Torres Strait employees. But interestingly if you ask our employees, are they disability support workers, are they lifestyle support workers, they will emphatically look at you and say, nah we just care for our mob because that's what it's supposed to be. So I think that's one of my most proudest.

Jennifer Cullen

I think the second most proudest thing that we have done is build a network across Australia of information and referral and understanding about what is this thing called brain injury. And we've been able to bleed that to individuals and communities, but more broadly across the intersections where brain injury often plays out. And by that I mean in the criminal justice system, both for adults and young people, domestic and family violence, housing and homelessness, out of home care. Over the last 10 years we've seen some pretty amazing national conversations about how brain injury intersects across those service systems. So we would consider ourselves not a disability brain injury specific organisation, but more an organisation that influences, you know, intersectional discussions about brain injury.

Evie Naufal

Jennifer, I want to ask you a bit more about that property that you were talking about. In our last episode, we spoke to Brent Woolgar who works for DSC, and he spoke a lot about how the built environment can really profoundly impact people's lives. And I'm wondering what the built environment or architecture looks like through an Aboriginal lens. How did that impact your design?

Jennifer Cullen

We were very fortunate in that we were able to work upon invitation with the two tribal groups in Cairns and local architects who were very well connected. We actually sat down and spoke about what was the architectural design in Cairns in those olden days and from there literally the elders actually drew designs in the earth, and then the architects took the concept of the housing design from the way back old way and they built it up into a modern architectural design. We then brought it down to our deadly white people at Synapse who also had input around location, some of that white man's safety. It's quite interesting because it's two by four duplex on a parcel of land and often people will say to us, oh, that's above SDA and we will say, well for that particular group of Aboriginal people in Cairns, it's a communal living space. Everyone has their own space, but we have places where we all can gather collectively, we have our fire pit, we have a place that catches, you know, the winter breeze and the summer sun, and it's where everyone actually gravitates to.

And I think the point is understanding the history of the Aboriginal country and land you're on leads to an understanding of the appropriate design, both from a, you know, eco-friendly as the white people would say it, but also how people actually gather and prefer to gather in those. And because of that space and design, Evie what's really remarkable, we have so many people who come into our housing from old people to babies. I was there yesterday and we had an eight-week old baby who everyone was able to support in the growing up and development because it's open and it represents Aboriginality, our culture, our sense of belonging and welcomeness. So that community, both black and white do come in and spend time with us and with our tenants, and I think that's what's really important, that's what makes me so proud.

Roland Naufal

It's fabulous listening to you, Jennifer. I know you well enough to understand what you do well enough to know that you'll spend a lot of time in Aboriginal communities sitting in the dirt, yarning, talking to people at a level that they want to talk. And then you've been on the Independent Advisory Council, which is the most senior body advising the NDIS since it began, you've been there since it began and sometimes it must feel pretty schizophrenic. Like sometimes you're an Aboriginal elder and sometimes you're this white man's advisor or an advisor to a very, very senior bureaucracy. But what I want to ask you about that schizophrenia is, is it possible to reconcile those two things? Are you able to bring the voice through to Canberra and bring it back to the Aboriginal communities?

Jennifer Cullen

I will tell you that when I don't I could get a good smack on the bum from the elders if I don't do it right, and so in some ways I'm still an Aboriginal child as well. I have complete, complete responsibility for ensuring that I impart with consent and on the knowledge from the elders that I engage with to pass the message stick to those people that need the message stick. That is my obligation as an Aboriginal woman. But I think for me that reconciliation is also an obligation to those people in Canberra, whichever government I talk about to hear the message of them old people and young people with disabilities and make sure I do that correctly and then make sure I pass back to them the messages that I have heard. And it's a responsibility for both of the worlds I live in, my Aboriginal world and the white world, because for me my family believe we need, continue to need real deadly white people who also want to contribute through to reconciliation, particularly for my people with lived experience of disability in this country.

Roland Naufal

That's a perfect segue to a question I wanted to ask you, which is some advice I want you to give us. So DSCs been successful in being a training and consulting business in the NDIS where we're happy with where we are, we're happy with our reach and influence and the debate that Evie and I have characterized as the debate that goes on within DSC. And we would like to do more effective work supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the NDIS. And Evie says, no, you can't go there unless we've got an Aboriginal person working with us, which leaves us not doing anything. And my response is, well, you know, let's just get our shit together and do stuff. And Evie is no, you can't do it. And that pretty much ends up in that response that you talked about before Jennifer about nothing happens.

So what could we do generally? You know, we have got fantastic resources, really skilled people, great communication mechanisms and we'd love, you know, there's a bunch of people, I think probably every one of us to the last person would love to be doing more effective work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. How do we do it?

Jennifer Cullen

I'm on Team Evie. And I think having an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person in the workplace is one thing, but I think it's about the examination of what is the cultural knowledge that you need to be able to do to contribute to making a difference. And I know, and again, this is only my style and we're not homogenous us black fellows by any means. But one of the first things that, you know, I do, if I've got a problem, is seek out the wisdom of an elder and say, this is who we are, what should we do to contribute or help? Because the last thing you want to is the token black feller in which everything, a point of Aboriginal business goes through that person, finding a wise person and sit down, will be able to help you figure out what it is that you need to do at DSC to contribute to making a difference for our mob with a disability.

Roland Naufal

That's fabulous. Thank you.

Evie Naufal

I'm curious to know Jennifer, what brought you to the disability sector?

Jennifer Cullen

Oh, so I'll make it short hey because I talk too long Evie.

Roland Naufal

No, you don't. No, you're great. Really concise in your answers. There's going to be very little editing. This is great.

Jennifer Cullen

I moved from Queensland down to Canberra for 10 years. All my siblings were coming back to Brisbane. I was working in aged care for 10 years. It was time to come home. So I applied for a job that just happened to be in disability, just fell into it. From there over a number of jobs, I had one of the best mentors and this just comes back to that intergenerational thing. I worked with him as disability services manager out past Ipswich. So, you know, a bit of rural work I got to do. And then he moved over to a big aged care disability provider in Brisbane, headhunted me. And I'll never forget, he took me out for lunch one day and he said, Jennifer, it's time for you to leave. And I said Ah hah, what? Thinking surely there's performance management or anything.

I said I don't understand. He said, you have outgrown me. You've got your wings. You're young. You've heard my perspective for four or five years. You will become tarnished if I keep you, here's a job. It's at Brain Injury Association of Queensland, apply for it by the end of the week and put me down as a ref, the best thing I ever heard. You know, surround yourself Jennifer, with people who are smarter than you, it's time for you to go, and that was 2004. And then I had a really brilliant CEO who then put me into different parts of the business as a young lady and gave me an opportunity and then made sure that he found people outside of Brain Injury Association of Queensland who could actually mentor and build my skill. And who encouraged me as the first person who encouraged me in a disability service industry to stand up for my people with lived experience of disability and to occasionally wear shoes.

Evie Naufal

I feel really moved hearing you tell that story Jennifer, and it's so congruent with the leader that you now are looking to create those, not just creating opportunities for people, but really genuinely valuing the input that younger people have, it makes so much sense.

Jennifer Cullen

Yesterday I was talking to one of our young ones who's just got, you know, white man's way of promotion at Synapse and she said, oh Auntie I'm scared. Oh shit, I'm scared, oh shit, I'm scared. I'll do it. I won't let you down, oh shit, I'm scared, ahh you know. And so just holding her steady, it's a wonderful opportunity for her, but also recognising, you know, what is it we need to do to hold her safe so when she does fail. And we talked yesterday about, yeah you're going to stuff that, stuff-ups you know, everyone does, but it's how many times you get off your knees and say, I'm going to do this for our people with complex disabilities, you know. And it's about having a relationship with our young ones where they can, you know, mentor us as well. So she can say, nah Auntie, that's not how we talk to young people, they don't, you know, womba in their head, I'll do that Auntie, you're ways too old and creating that environment.

Roland Naufal

We always knew this was going to be a great podcast and it certainly has been. Jennifer we know there's a bunch of influential people that listen to this podcast and I know they'll be wanting to hear what you've got to say. What are some of the most important things you think need to change in the NDIS for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders? What could we do better?

Jennifer Cullen

Like I said, taking the way of choice and control into our way of self-determination, the nine principles of social, emotional and wellbeing, which is clearly set out in, you know, the strategic framework for wellbeing of indigenous people in this country. They are the sense of belonging, achieving autonomy, you know, active involvement, decision-making and design. We allow other participants and other groups to be part of co-design let us co-design through leadership. That's the most important. Then you will see things like changes from the quarterly report, the under-utilization plans, things like that will change if you give us the opportunity.

And I think one of the things that has held me absolutely steady for building our place up in Cairns is the most powerful song by Uncle Kev Carmody. And I will say this forever and a day, particularly when it comes to SIL and SDA, there's a steadily song called 'On The Wire', and this song has held me steady and all my people that have been wanting to build this place. And it's almost a little bit poetic, but I'm pretty sure anyone connected with the NDIA would get this when it comes to SDA for our people and the chorus goes, "we'll take you home to the land we know, give you that piece of the evening, give you that moon with the wind on your face, the rains and the change of each season". That is how you determine an SDA design for my people with disabilities.

Even sitting there yesterday at Warner Street and just singing it to myself going you know, and you can feel, you know, they're our principals, that was our principals way back then when we were designing, what is it that is the essence of safety and belonging for our people around housing and homelessness. We'll take you back to the land, and our tenants, it's not their country at all, but we've created the essence of Aboriginality in their spirit by using that in the background as our framework for how we build, that and sitting there yesterday it was just like, yeah, we're getting it, we're getting it.

Roland Naufal

I'm the one with a smile on my face when you were talking about it before. Thank you so much, Jennifer Cullen for taking the time to speak to us.

Evie Naufal

Thanks Jennifer.

Jennifer Cullen

Thank you both for having me. I really appreciate the opportunity to have a yarn up.

Maia Thomas

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