

Disability Done Different: Episode 5

Gail Jeltres on... human connection and the art of rebranding

Podcast transcript

Audio Length: 00:18:48
Hosts: Roland & Evie Naufal
Guest: Gail Jeltres

Start of Audio

Intro

Maia: Hi, this is Maia Thomas. I am the DSC podcast producer of our first ever series. 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 is on helping providers to survive and thrive in the NDIS. Our purpose is better outcomes for people with disability. We take a different approach to our work. We focus on what works best for you, not us. We're real people and we respect that you are too, we challenge what needs to change. These podcasts bring a new dimension to our work and our commitment to be fun, frank, and future-facing. We hope you enjoy listening to them as much as we did putting them together.

Evie: Hello, and welcome, my name is Evie Naufal.

Roland: And I'm Roland Naufal.

Evie: And you're listening to Disability Done Different...

Roland & Evie: ...Candid Conversations [in unison]

Evie: Today, we are candidly conversing with...

Roland: Gail Jeltres from...

Evie: From... Unisson.

Roland: It used to be Sunshine, that's why we looked at each other.

Evie: That would have been cute if we had said Unisson in unison. [Laughter].

Roland: We got the Sunshine in Unisson anyway, so...

Evie: Unisson, formally known as Sunshine.

Roland: With us today is our producer.

Evie: Maia Thomas, welcome.

Maia: Thank you.

Roland: Maia, you've listened to this podcast and our interview, what are some of the things that we got out of it?

Maia: Well, some of the themes that came out of this one were Gail talking about what has and hasn't improved with the NDIS rollout in New South Wales.

Roland: She talks about the art of human connection, which is a fabulous relationship-based culture change program.

Evie: That was a mouthful, too. [Laughter].

Roland: It was.

Evie: What I find really interesting, too, is the rebranding process they've gone through to go from Sunshine to Unisson and what that looked like along the way.

Roland: And we talk about Disability Done Different. Actually, we talk about leadership done different with Rebecca Fletcher, who operates, I think, almost a servant leadership model. She may not even know what that is, but she certainly embodies what I regard as servant leadership and Gail and I talk about that, as well. You were there, too, weren't you, Evie?

Evie: I was, but I'm a bit quiet for this one. I wasn't feeling my best that day.

Roland: One of our better podcasts, let's listen to Gail.

Evie: Hello, this is a podcast.

Roland: I could do the same joke again.

Evie: Disability Services Consulting. [Laughter]. We're really excited. Let's roll.

Start of Interview

Roland: Today, Evie and I are talking to Gail Jeltres from the newly rebranded or not that quite newly rebranded Unisson organisation. Gail is a long-term traveller in disability. She's done lots of different interesting things. Today, we're going to reflect on some of those things and some of her opinions and some of her experiences. Welcome, Gail.

Gail: Thank you.

Roland: Evie, you're feeling less than perfect?

Evie: I am, I'm recording from my bedroom with a blanket around me.

Roland: If Evie sounds like a normal human being it's because a cold has taken the edge off.

Evie: [Laughter].

Roland: So, we met a few years ago now, Gail. I think it's about four years ago. I remember we were sitting in a back room in these offices talking about marketing. I remember being

quite intimidated by you because of your experience, your knowledge of the NDIS and stuff that was going on. It was like, holy shit, I've met someone that actually knows, and I can't bullshit my way through this one. You've been in the NDIS for quite a while, haven't you?

Gail: Yes. I think, like everybody, we've been on this bit of a journey and battling our way through the nuances of NDIS, should we say.

Roland: Let's return to the NDIS in a little while but not spend too much time on it because we don't want to spend too much time on it. Gail, you've got a really extensive history in disability services and this is a big opening question. Do you reckon things have improved since when you first started?

Gail: Short answer is, yes. Being in the industry for some 30 years of so, I've had the great advantage of kicking off and spending a great deal of time within the employment sphere. I think with employment and particularly supported employment, there was a lot of work that I did around specialised training program. That was a really solid ground work in terms of how you work, how one works and trains and supports people with an intellectual disability. I think a lot of those nuances around rigor has dissipated over that.

If you like, that's probably the one aspect of the NDIS that concerns me a little bit. The flipside of that is that NDIS offers the opportunity for relational relationships and interest to be the connectors, if you like, between staff and people with a disability. However, I think it runs the risk of coming at a loss of some of those skills. I think there's a lot that is possibly lost.

Roland: I want to move onto the Art of Human Connection, because you and Katrina have been driving that at Unisson and Sunshine when you started. The Art of Human Connection is about culture change, it's about supporting people to be more connected. I'm going to ask you a bit about it. In a time so turbulent, as the NDIS in New South Wales, which is particularly turbulent, why have you gone for soft and fuzzy human connection stuff, when you should be looking at how do we connect with a portal and get that stuff done? [sarcasm]

Gail: Well, I think we do leave that to a small cohort of our financial team over here, and other members of the team. In all seriousness, I think connection is what we're all about. I think that's what living in this world is about. I have real concerns about how people with an intellectual disability are perceived. For me, it's a way of being for all of us in how we actually see and can be seen. That fundamentally is what sits behind the Art of Human Connection for us.

Roland: It's all about relationships?

Gail: All about relationships.

Roland: It's all about everybody in the organisation building meaningful relationships, not just with the people with whom they work, but also with each other. You've done a couple

of years in the development pipeline and now every staff member in your organisation is going, or has gone through it?

Gail: That's correct.

Roland: What are you seeing? Are there benefits or is it just a really expensive program?

Gail: [Laughter]. Probably a bit of both.

Roland: [Laughter].

Gail: I do think that there are benefits. I can tell you, yesterday we had ten members of the finance team go off-site for a little bit of work to look at our processes around billing and around a whole lot of aspects of work that they're needing to focus on. The first hour was very much about, tell me your story. It's a fairly new team, many members of the team were a little bit challenged. The first five minutes, I had them standing up, lining up, and looking into each other's eyes and getting a real sense of who are you seeing. To me, that's finance.

Roland: This is finance you're talking about and senior management, it's great. One of the things we talk about a lot, too, and we'll keep talking about is people come to the disability industry. They can earn more money often doing other tasks, but they come here because they want to make a difference in people's lives. You're managing heart-felt people, you're using a program that builds relationships. Managing heart-felt people is not always easy. Sometimes they feel like they know better than you do in how to work with the people with whom we're working. Do you see those challenges in managing people who are vocationally-driven?

Gail: Yes, absolutely. I think that's another small aspect of the Art of Human Connection. A lot of what we talk about is coming from a space of holding and a space of generosity. That really speaks to, okay, we're going to have some difficult conversations, and there are times that you do want to lean across the table and yank someone's ear. Okay, let's recognise that and let's take a pause and let's create the space so we can genuinely understand each other. Yet, we talk about seeking to hear before we are heard. I think that's very much that, that opens the conversation. That opens the safety for discourse, even robust disagreement.

Roland: I wonder if some people listening are thinking, "I bet they're a small outfit, they've got about 30 staff, and they can really make it work." Tell us about the size of your organisation?

Gail: We support about 700 individuals and their families. We have around 650 staff.

Roland: You've been here for how long?

Gail: 24 years.

Roland: How do you stay in this for so long?

Gail: I'm pretty good at morphing my role and making it a bit interesting.

Roland: You stood still while the organisation has changed around?

- Gail:** [Laughter]. That's right. No, I think we've been really fortunate in having Rebecca as our CEO. Rebecca Fletcher has been with the organisation, herself, for 30 years. She certainly seems ahead.
- Roland:** And she's leaving?
- Gail:** She's leaving. She's leaving in October of this year. The board have really created a process where she will hang about and provide some guidance. Whilst I'm sure a number of other people might go, "For goodness sakes, what will that mean for the next CEO?" The reality is, Rebecca herself is extremely good. She's extremely humble and just takes that backstep and allows life to happen, work to happen, she's always ready and available to offer that kind of guidance. I think she's just going to be a great rudder for the new CEO that comes on board.
- Roland:** I want to jump in about Rebecca because my experience with disability organisations now for 30 years, there's so often a male CEO and sometimes a female CEO is driven by growth and wanting to grow the organisation. You feel it's really just a misnomer for their ego. They need to prove how big their ego is, they put stuff on it, like, we need to serve more people with disability or whatever is the excuse. You can really see an ego-driven growth sitting underneath it. I met Rebecca when I first met you.
- I was stunned by how quiet she was, how silent she was. I really wondered. I thought, what sort of leader is someone that is so silent? Now, I'm probably one of her biggest fans because Rebecca creates the space for other people to lead. She does it in a really contained, amazing way. I think she's the very antithesis of the ego-driven leader that is driving an organisation for their own needs. She steps back and allows other people to step in.
- I imagine she's probably pretty certain about the things that are in and out of contention and things that she'll set the boundaries very quietly but allow other people to play. Is that accurate?
- Gail:** Yes, absolutely. I think Rebecca brings a significant number of skills to the table. She is first and foremost an accountant and she will confess to that. She also has qualifications in human resources. She also has a master's in teaching English to speakers of other languages. She just has a great number of skills and many years across a number of different service types. I think her real strength is being able to ascertain what other people's strengths are and creating the space for that to shine.
- Roland:** Gosh, that's called servant leadership. It's got a bunch of different names. Yes, we're big fans of Rebecca, as you can hear, folks.
- Evie:** Roland, you mentioned at the beginning that Gail is from a recently rebranding organisation called Unisson, for those of you who may not have been following along at home, previously known as Sunshine. Can you tell us a little bit about that process, Gail, and how the organisation and particularly your staff have responded to the change?

Gail: Yes, certainly. For those who may not who, when Lorna Hodgkinson created the institutions in 1923, she actually named it the Sunshine Institute. It was at her death it became the Lorna Hodgkinson's Home. I.e., the singular roof over the institution. When we started our devolution and closure of the institution and had homes out in the community, people started calling us The Lorna Hodgkinson's Homes, which really started to annoy us a little bit. Their rationale was certainly that we were more than just the institution with many homes.

Evie: When you see people, you mean the community saw you that way?

Gail: Yes, and even our own staff. Some of our stakeholders would just throw the additional 'S' in. Many of us have not really been a fan of the name, well, we consider it rather childish, if you like. Whilst we had an extremely strong culture, we just felt that the name itself didn't promote who we were. That said, when we started going down this little bit of an exercise, there were many people who went... Sunshine, but that's such a warm – it's about life and it's life-giving.

Why would you want to lose it? We certainly encountered a little bit of resistance to that. We did a fair bit of work that clearly look at the archetype, who we were as an organisation and what we represented. Yes, it was a bit of a process and we came up with Unisson and for those of you who don't know, we have a double-S in our name, which is a bit of a nod to the Sunshine. Those S's are coloured with the same colours as our previous logo.

I think there was a great deal of work, though, in communicating to staff and bringing them along on that journey, in terms of why this was important for us.

Evie: Naming is such emotional work, isn't it? It's so hard to get everybody on board. Roland, I'm reminded of the story you told of when the Spastic Society renamed, how much buy-in they had, do you remember?

Roland: Yes, in Victoria, the Spastic Society renamed to Scope, which was about a decade ago, that the announcement was put out. I was so delighted. That they had 96 percent, this is testing my memory, but it was something like that, a positive response rate to the name change. My response was, well, you've waited way too long to get 96 percent. You should have done it when 60 percent of people agreed to it. 96 is far too strong. Was that the point of the story, Evie?

Evie: Yes.

Roland: New South Wales was insane. It shorted an insane timeline for whatever the word is for incredibly insane, from three years of rollout to two years of rollout. Things have been tough in New South Wales, haven't they, for you and the NDIS?

Gail: It's been, yes, at times, we've certainly used the word debacle. It's been exhausting trying to keep ahead and trying to second-guess the where to next. It's meant significant resources to responding to the processes. We still haven't got it quite right. There are still issues around billing. There's still lots of work that needs to be done in terms of how we roster shifts for individuals and how they're able to see that, and how people can

make those changes, and how we can respond to changes in those shifts, as a myriad of things that really add to the complexity at this point in time.

Roland: I started with a tough question, I want to finish with a tough question. What do you think it will take over the next quite few years for people with disability to start exercising some real choices? What kinds of things? We don't need a comprehensive answer, it's too tough for comprehensive. What sorts of things would you think would assist people in getting real choices?

Gail: I think we really need to address the issues around housing. I think we really need to have a decent conversation and some action in terms of affordable housing. I think there needs to be some additional funding within NDIS that goes to a whole host of providers to look at building infrastructure that will support that. There needs to be a lot of consideration around training for staff. There's a lot of training that just isn't built into the NDIS funding for organisations now.

I think that's really critical in terms of how we respond to the needs of people. There's also a piece of work to be done in terms of engaging and educating the community. Starting at times with family members and not seeing some of their family members as being less than, or this will do, really seeing great potential for them.

Roland: That's a really interesting starting place. That's a really interesting starting place.

Gail: I certainly don't mean to be critical, it's a bit of a generalisation, but I think there's some real honest looking that needs to be done there.

Roland: Gail, thank you so much for joining us today. We proved that a cold can hold Evie down because she didn't get a lot of words in that.

Evie: [Laughter]. Lucky you.

Roland: It's been a great session. Thank you very much.

Gail: Thank you.

Evie: Thanks, Gail.

End of Interview

Outro

Evie: You've been listening to Disability Done Different: Candid Conversations.

Roland: And it was fun.

Evie: [Laughter]. It was fun. You're always having fun. If you want to learn more about DSC, you can do so by checking out our website: disabilityservicesconsulting.com.au. Or subscribe to our newsletter. You can find links to do both in the show notes.

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