

Culture Transformation at Danila Dilba Health Service.

Interview



Danila Dilba Health Service (DDHS) is a leading community-based organisation providing primary healthcare services to the indigenous community in Darwin, Australia. To support its growth strategy, DDHS knew it had to transform and create a culture of engagement and performance.

Olga Havnen, CEO of Danila Dilba Health Service, shares her perspectives on DDHS' culture transformation.

Korn Ferry: Can you talk about the culture that powers your organisation's success?

Olga Havnen: I think one of the critical factors for our success is that we have been able to recruit, attract and retain people who come to Danila Dilba with a high sense of passion and commitment. They are wanting to work in Aboriginal health because they recognise this is where our biggest challenges as a nation is.

The Aboriginal health status here in the Northern Territory is probably amongst some of the worst you will see anywhere in the world. So, the workforce that we have is incredible. Sixty per cent of our employees are Aboriginal and that's fantastic.

We have a highly diverse workforce—with many people from different backgrounds, cultures, and experiences—who work across the organisation, not just in clinics, but also in human resources, finance, and IT. I think all of that contributes to the culture of the organisation, but, most importantly, I think a lot of that culture is driven by the values and passion that not only board members and the community have, but also our staff.

Korn Ferry: Building a culture like this does not happen overnight - you have to go through a lot of effort to do this. So, what was your aspiration when you started?

Olga Havnen: My aspiration when I first came to Danila Dilba as Chief Executive Officer some seven eight years ago, was really to try and transform the organisation into being the best possible organisation that we could be—as the best provider of high-quality Aboriginal health care services in the country. I did not have any aspirations about trying to become the biggest, but it was really about understanding what it means to be the best and how do you get to be a high performing organisation.

I recognised very early on that there were a lot of practices in our day-to-day operations that were not contributing to that kind of performance, so there was a lot of work to do, both in terms of systems and

"We recognised early on that a lot of practices in our day-to-day operations were not contributing to the performance they wanted to achieve."

organisational change. We also had to find ways of working much more effectively with our critical leadership group and with our teams across the organisation – from our medical receptionist, transport officers, community engagement officers right through to general practitioners.

This involved having everybody aligned and on the same page, understanding what we were trying to achieve, and having a very strong sense of why culture in an organisation is so important.

So, getting people to think much more about the way in which we treated each other, what our expectations are in terms of not only behaviour and performance, but also about how to live the values that we profess to have.

Korn Ferry: If you reflect back to that time, what was coming in the way that made you think you need to review your organisation's culture, leadership capability and design?

Olga Havnen: There were a number of things that became evident as we grew. We realised the current structure was not going to work for us.

It was difficult to look at other organisations that might have had a more creative or innovative structure and we struggled with that for some time—hence our engagement with Korn Ferry to help us work through that.

The other thing that became very evident was that whilst there were some people in critical roles, who had very good professional and technical skills, they were not necessarily the right fit for the organisation at that particular point in time. Also, we realised that as the organisation continued to grow, that there was a need for different kinds of skillsets.

With some people, we were able to build on existing capabilities and develop those skillsets to help them attain more critical leadership roles. But for some people, it was beyond their capacity to make the kind of changes personally that I think sometimes we need to do. So, we had to have those really very difficult conversations, but hopefully that was done in a respectful way and people felt that whilst they had been valued members of staff, this was not the right role for them at this particular point in time.

Where possible we have tried to encourage people to stay with us, perhaps in a slightly different role, still trying to build their skills and capabilities and provide them with opportunities; but where it was absolutely necessary to let people go, we had to do that.

Korn Ferry: People decisions are some of the toughest decisions that you make on this journey. What are some of the other challenges you faced on this journey?

Olga Havnen: I think it is getting everybody across the organisation to understand why change is important, and why you cannot stay the same as you have always been.

There is a tendency when some staff that have been around the organisation for a long time, and who have come from a wealth of experience in Aboriginal health, to be resistant to change because it means that you have to learn new skills, go about the business differently and work with different groups of people. That is not always easy—some people like doing what they have always done. So, it was critical to communicate and engage with staff throughout the organisation to get them on board with this journey and for them to be able to see the results and sharing the successes that the data was starting to show us when we made some of these shifts and changes. Because we had the data, it was easy to track the results and the outcomes to build a sense of confidence and trust in the need for change.

I had many staff say to me “Oh for goodness’ sake, can we please just stop doing all this change, we just want some sort of consistency, we want to be able to consolidate and so on.” But I think that now people are starting to understand that change isn’t something you do once—it’s ongoing, it’s constant. I guess in uncertain times like we have had over the last 12 months, with respect to COVID, we have had to develop really complex and detailed plans about how we would respond to the event of that outbreak in the community.

That really highlighted for people why you’ve got to be on the front foot—you got to be thinking about what’s coming over the horizon and how do you prepare for that, how do you make sure that you’re not going to be caught flat footed, you have to be well prepared for these sorts of events. So, I guess it has been an interesting transformation journey in some ways and one thing that I hope most people would say is that they enjoyed and learned a lot from that.

Korn Ferry: Could you please talk about how putting the right organisation structure in place has contributed to your success.

Olga Havnen: I think, having the right structure and being really clear about role definition, role clarity, accountability and performance is critical. Setting targets together and understanding that the organisation’s achievements do not come down to any one individual, but rather the contributions of everybody and for everybody to understand what bit they play in achieving those goals.

We’re much more engaged in conversations about what does our data tell us—how do we know that we’re performing well? How do you interrogate that data for future planning? For instance, how do we know where we need to open the next clinic and at what point is the right time to do it?

I think people generally across the organisation now have a much better sense of the organisation’s vision, goals, aspirations, and the way that we need to work. Strategic plans are actually really important: they’re not some sort of a statement or a publication that you pull out when you have got visitors. It helps staff understand what role they play in achieving those goals.

Korn Ferry: Reflecting a little bit more on that Organizational Structure changes, were there a few

“Having the right structure and clarity about role definition, accountability and performance have been critical to our transformation.”

"The organisation's achievements do not come down to any one individual, but rather the contributions of everybody and it's important for everybody to understand what bit they play in achieving those goals."

changes in terms of some newly defined roles that kick started some activity in a few areas for you

Olga Havnen: I think in terms of the organisational structure, there are two critical roles that we feel have been enormously valuable. First is the establishment of a dedicated Business Development Unit to help us explore more commercial opportunities, rather than relying on ground funding or us just relying on Medicare revenue. The commercial and business focus has been a really positive thing.

The other role that I think to be a central linchpin in driving all of this has been the position of a Service Excellence Coach. This is something that is quite new for an Aboriginal organisation, but I think also probably quite new in the Australian context. I am not sure many companies have moved down that path of looking for somebody to help coach and mentor to increase and enhance performance internally within the organisation.

These kind of innovations and different ways of thinking, I think, will prove to be incredibly valuable and I suspect lots of other Aboriginal health services will also follow in due course.

Korn Ferry: An organisation is only as good as its people. So how did you build the top team, the leadership team capability that was needed to drive this transformation?

Olga Havnen: We are fortunate to have a really talented pool of people within the organisation. It was really about harnessing and building on the capabilities and capacities. In some cases, I think people came to that almost instinctively and it gave them an opportunity to further develop and utilise their existing skills. So, it was harnessing that kind of experience and capability that they already had.

In terms of how you get that senior leadership group to work cohesively and collectively, I think communication is absolutely the critical linchpin—being honest, trustworthy, and maintaining integrity at all times.

And really being able and willing to debate things, to discuss things that might be contentious or where there is not a high level of agreement. Having different views is perfectly okay. What you do not want is group think. So, I encourage people to challenge me; why would you make that decision? What did you think about that? How did you come to that position?

So, I was testing and trusting each other enough to have those kinds of honest conversations. I don't really use the word robust because sometimes it means that you've got to have the big shouting matches and arguments and that's not what we're after. I think it's about people coming to the table well prepared, having thought about the critical issues and being willing to put their ideas on the table.

Korn Ferry: What advice can you share with other CEOs who are thinking about transforming their organisation, people, and culture?

Olga Havnen: First of all, I would strongly encourage people to do that. Go about your planning really well, but I think most importantly, thinking about who your external support, advisor/consultants are best placed to work with you on this journey.

I deliberately stayed away from the more conventional consulting groups and organisations and really looked to Korn Ferry because of what I saw on your website, the kind of work that you do as an organisation and the fact that you're always out there, looking for innovation, new ways of thinking and working.

But also, really harnessing and capitalising on the human potential that already exists in organisations. Sometimes there is this tendency to think that you just got to get rid of a bunch of people bring in new people and that will fix things. I personally do not believe that is the way to go. So, having had that opportunity to work with Korn Ferry and to have that ongoing relationship for us, I think has been incredibly valuable.

Korn Ferry regular client base, I suppose, is quite different to us. We are a small, not for profit organisation and we work in Aboriginal health which is a very specialised field. But the kind of work, Korn Ferry does across multinational, transnational corporations, big mergers and acquisitions, demergers and so on, that goes to the heart of organisational culture. This gave me the sense of confidence that you would understand the sorts of challenges that we were facing even though we were a small organisation. I think it raises lots of very similar and consistent issues.

Olga Havnen, CEO of Danila Dilba Health Service, talks about the impact of culture transformation on employee engagement

Korn Ferry: Why do you think people are so proud to work at Danila Dilba Health Service?

Olga Havnen: I am glad that our staff have finally gotten to where they are, where 89% of our staff say they're incredibly proud to work at Danila Dilba.

Some years ago, when I started at DDHS staff would tell me very quietly that "I don't ever go shopping in my uniform out to work because I'm sick of all of the complaints and criticisms." So, I think what it says to me is that as we have been able to grow to meet our clients' needs. Our services have gone from three clinics to now nine, and we have expanded our services, so clinics have become one stop shops for our client group and have made services more accessible—the clinics are located close to where people live..

All of those things have helped contribute to building a high level of community engagement and trust in Danila Dilba to our clients. That in turn has reflected in staff attitude—they are proud to work at DDHS.

There is nothing more amazing than being stopped in the street by Aboriginal people I don't even know, who care to tell me "I'm just so grateful for Danila Dilba and the services you provide," or "You've saved my mother's life" or "I don't know where we've been without you." They will also name staff individually saying this person has just done the most amazing thing. That gives me goosebumps as a CEO to hear that type of feedback.

We encourage and welcome critical feedback—how can we improve our service to do better. But at the same time, we also share with staff and with the community the great news stories where people say, "Hey you know we think Danila Dilba is fantastic."

Korn Ferry: Have you seen this engagement translated into business and organisational performance and results?

Olga Havnen: Absolutely, I think the engagement with staff and with community members is absolutely

critical, that's central to our business.

And so, if we did not have that level of engagement and positivity, we certainly would not be able to deliver the volume and quality and quantity of services that we currently provide. Darwin is a relatively small town, the Bush Telegraph works incredibly well, so if we were getting it wrong, we would surely know about it, really quickly.

About Korn Ferry

Korn Ferry is a global organizational consulting firm. We work with our clients to design optimal organization structures, roles, and responsibilities. We help them hire the right people and advise them on how to reward and motivate their workforce while developing professionals as they navigate and advance their careers.