

PROFILE

Pursuing change

In 2015, Kate Thiele won the Telstra South Australian Business Woman of the Year for Purpose and Social Enterprise. She speaks to Emily Chantiri about her rewarding career.



As a young woman, Kate Thiele FAICD had absolutely no idea where she wanted to go in her career, although she would occasionally dream of being a barrister. “I don’t think I would have had the skills to be a barrister and I recall feeling lost as to what to do,” she says. “I was blessed to have parents who encouraged me, particularly my mum who was a remarkable woman. I think she was ahead of her time.”

Thiele decided to pursue a degree in nursing and says “it was the done thing” for women who were uncertain of their career path. “You either did nursing or teaching.”

Her mother insisted that if she wanted to become a nurse that she complete her training at university rather than in a hospital environment. “Mum was a nurse, she worked hard and earned her own income. She also volunteered and was very community

minded,” says Thiele. “She was very insistent that I go to university, so I enrolled in a diploma in applied science in nursing.”

During this period, her father’s background in management began to influence her career path. “My father was the managing director of a building company,” she says. “I’ve gained a remarkable blend of both traits. My career has intercepted these paths many times. I have a strong commercial drive in the way that I approach my work.”

Thiele flourished in her studies, however she decided not to continue with a career in nursing. “Looking back, I think my mother must have been mortified. I was doing really well. I walked away from it and moved into retail and I loved it.”

Thiele is a strong advocate of retail as a career choice. She says her time in retail helped her gain a greater

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understanding of customer service. “Being in front of customers is where I learned my core service skills of which I am very proud. Today, I mentor many year 12 students. I tell the students that any form of retail experience will be an advantage to you,” she adds. “You’ll gain innate problem solving skills and consumer awareness. It’s a great foundation to learn about customers and markets.”

Thiele then moved into sales and marketing management with a national optometric company, then to a global packaging company where she led an Australian team responsible for 9,000 customers, including Telstra and the Bodyshop Group.

In the mid 2000s, while working in the manufacturing industry, her career shifted direction. Thiele says the transition came when she was looking at ways to enhance employee performance outcomes.

“I was looking out the window of manufacturing and I couldn’t see any examples of large corporates or even middle range corporates truly harnessing employee talent to drive performance,” she says. “It was very much a time when everything was about the bottom line, even triple bottom line. I wanted to be in a space where I could drive business through people engagement and smash performance outcomes to create great culture and growth.”

A move to NFPs

Thiele’s journey into the non-governmental organisation (NGO) sector began after she applied for a role as director of business development in the marketing division of the Cancer Council in Adelaide in 2005. Thiele calls herself an accidental not-for-profit (NFP) person.

“The role caught my eye. I thought ‘great, this has to be about people,’” she says. “Sadly, my beloved mother who was this amazing influence in my life had died of bowel cancer. However, I didn’t go to champion the cause of cancer because of my mother; it’s not how I operate. The position was really about people driving change.”

While at the council, Thiele commenced her MBA and won an award for entrepreneurship and innovation. “Out of this role, I discovered I had the trait of being a bit of an entrepreneur within a business setting.”

Four years later, in 2009, Thiele became CEO of Guide Dogs, South Australia and Northern Territory. She said the guide dog role appealed to her on many levels. “This was post GFC and the company was interested in driving financial stability. The board wanted to be sure their brand survived during this patch,” she says. “I felt this was a perfect match for me. It needed an entrepreneurial and business development skill-set, along with my passion for

driving social sustainability and social improvement.”

Thiele is keen to clarify that Guide Dogs is not an animal charity, but a people charity. She adds that the organisation supports people living with blindness, hearing loss and children with autism. “Dog services is a small part of what the organisation does. A lot of people are surprised by this. It’s a very complex service model and we are not only helping those with disabilities, but are also in the animal husbandry breeding space. It’s not a simple dog production organisation.”

Thiele says, there were some initial challenges with the board. While she was recruited for her business development skills to improve financial sustainability, the board lacked the skills to move forward.

“The board didn’t have the specific skills to focus on the space that I had been recruited to improve,” she says. “It had more of a representation of some skills. This was addressed in our first conversation in order to have robust frame to work in.”

She says the board was open to innovation and established dedicated board committees with tight terms of reference. This allowed them to focus on the areas of greatest priority and opportunity. It provided the vision for significant change, which was required for future sustainability. “We had to make quick decisions to reinvigorate the organisation as most of the metrics were heading in the wrong direction. The board’s belief in our brand was strong. We created a development subcommittee and we took business plan opportunities to this committee to test on behalf on the board, which was brilliant.”

Over the next seven years, Thiele says the board moved from a good representation to a very competent board with great business acumen and a real desire for improvement. “The Guide Dog board is outstanding,” says Thiele. “The key to this success was

developing values – and they have to start at the top. We worked on our consumer orientation and this set the tone of our values.”

The company’s mission statement was also re-evaluated. “We continually talk about our mission, and ask, ‘what is our strategy? What is our purpose?’ Our purpose is to improve the quality of life for those living with a disability.”

During her time, she doubled the client base of people living with complex disability and aged care needs, and delivered a fourfold increase in revenue through donor acquisition.

Beyond Guide Dogs

Thiele is a member of the Royal Zoological Society of SA, an animal conservation board, the Adelaide Festival Centre Trust and the Crows Foundation board.

Her most recent non-executive director and CEO experience has been in the disability sector, leading the change in the markets settings resulting from the National Disability Insurance Scheme. Between 2009 and 2017, she chaired numerous board committees including the audit and risk governance committee at Minda Incorporated, a disability NGO which supports 1,700 people living with intellectual disability.

In 2015, she won the Telstra South Australian Business Woman of the Year, for Purpose and Social Enterprise. This year, Thiele is relinquishing her role at Guide Dogs to pursue her own business goals. “I am very passionate about improving not just the disability sector, but other NGOs and small businesses,” she says. “It is a good time to achieve my personal goal. I have set up a company, *pursuit of Klarity*, which is designed to help organisations define their value proposition.”

Thiele also continues to extend her board profile with a primary focus on governance, financial performance and ASX listed boards. ■

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