

WeekendSwitzer

A GUIDING LIGHT

March 04, 2016
Published: Friday, March 04, 2016



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Words by Lucinda Schmidt

When Kate Thiele became CEO of Guide Dogs SA/NT in 2009, the first thing she did was call a staff meeting. The Adelaide-based charity, like many in the aftermath of the GFC, was struggling with flat revenue, low morale and shaky relationships.

“All the metrics of a good organisation were missing,” she recalls. “I asked the staff to tell me the organisation’s values and not one person could tell me a single one.”

Fast-forward six years and the energetic Thiele has radically overhauled the 60-year-old organisation. Turnover has tripled, donors have jumped tenfold to more than 50,000 a year, and regular donors have soared from 450 to 21,000 a year.

The new-look Guide Dogs SA/NT has won 15 industry awards, including most trusted charity for the past three years. And last November, Thiele won the Telstra Business Women’s national award for purpose and social enterprise.

There have been many changes, but one of the most significant is a program to train assistance dogs to help young children with autism. South Australia was the first state to do it, based on successful programs in the US. This year, an Australia-wide rollout begins.

Thiele says that her organization is not just about dogs. Her organization supports 3000 people with disabilities, including vision impaired people with canes not dogs, deaf and hearing impaired people (as well as those who get dogs for autism or blindness).

Thiele reels off several examples of how autism assistance dogs have helped children – and their families – cope with the devastating consequences of severe autism.

One five-year old boy, who slept only two hours a night and started his day at 1am, slept through on the first night his dog stayed in his room. Another boy, who damaged his teeth by chewing table corners, stopped after his dog was trained to stand between him and the furniture. A third child went from being completely non-verbal to a 30 word vocabulary, and a fourth stopped running around at night turning on the oven, stove and microwave.

“These are not companion dogs, they are service dogs; they change these little kids’ lives,” Thiele says.

Guide Dogs SA/NT has about 60 dogs working as guides for the vision impaired or as autism assistants. Another 60 are in training and Thiele hopes the breeding program will yield about 90 puppies this year.

Demand is enormous, for both types of dogs. Autism spectrum disorders are increasing and Thiele says more than 100,000 Australians will be legally blind by 2020.

“Every hour of every day, an Australian learns they will suffer vision impairment that can’t be corrected by glasses,” she says. “Of those 24, nine will become blind. My vision is that everyone who needs support can be helped.”

Thiele talks enthusiastically about increasing her organisation’s revenue streams (it recently opened a five-star “pet hotel”), helping people navigate the new national disability scheme and attracting the best and brightest staff to a culture of forward thinking and innovation.

While Thiele is passionate and committed, it’s clear there’s a toughness too. She’s overhauled the culture and let go of people who don’t fit the new approach. Even dog trainers – who must complete a four-year apprenticeship under someone with at least 10 years’ experience – must fit in.

“It’s a globally scarce skill set,” she says. “You could be the best dog whisperer in the world, but if you don’t fit our values you can’t come in.”

Thiele’s change management skills stem from an unusual career, spanning health, retail and manufacturing. From each job, she says, she has gained learning that helps in her present role.

She worked briefly in health after completing a diploma of applied science at the University of South Australia, then switched to retail, as a manager at Myer’s Rundle Street store in Adelaide. She stayed seven years, rising to assistant store manager, overseeing “soft goods”, such as womenswear, menswear and shoes.

“The gift that Myer gave me was a focus on customers,” Thiele says. “Myer also had superb sales training. Those fundamental skills stick with me today.”

She turned down a promotion to Myer’s Melbourne store to join

Laubman & Pank, a chain of optometric practices with 100 optometrists and 140 stores. Thiele was the first female executive in the company’s 89-year history, tasked with the retail aspects of selling eyewear.

It was a tough job, with one retail-minded director on the board gunning for her, and entrenched resistance to change from many of the optometrists, who would try to bamboozle her with professional jargon.

At her first board meeting, the hostile director sat with her CV in front of him and effectively re-interviewed her for the job she’d already been appointed to.

“He never lightened up on me,” Thiele says. “I learnt resilience, because it was a very difficult time. I learnt how to overcome obstacles at a personal level.”

The business, however, flourished and was sold to OPSM in 2001 (now part of Italy’s Luxottica Group, the world’s largest eyewear company).

Next came a stint in the male-dominated world of manufacturing, when Thiele ran sales and marketing for packaging group Paper Pak. For five years, she spent about half her time traveling around Australia visiting the

company's 9000 customers, starting when her third child was just six weeks old.

"Paper Pak's gift to me was it was the first place I really understood that I loved working with people," Thiele says. "I'm attracted to high achieving, self motivated people who think for themselves."

Then came what Thiele sees as her biggest career break, moving into the not for profit sector in a senior role with The Cancer Council. "I didn't ever intend to go into the not for profit sector," says Thiele, explaining that her mother had died of bowel cancer a couple of years earlier and that had awakened her interest in charitable organisations.

Now, she's a convert. "One of the joys of winning the Telstra award is that it is a lovely opportunity to share with business people that the not for profit sector is an amazing place to work. And it enables me to shine a light on the disability sector."

A perfect weekend

Read: Eating a beautiful breakfast with really good coffee and reading the physical newspaper at somewhere like Noosa, looking out over the water.

Eat: A degustation menu at a really fabulous restaurant

Drink: French champagne or an absolutely delicious chardonnay or perhaps a riesling. We're really fortunate in South Australia, we do have absolutely superb white wines.

Sport: I love Xtend Barre. It's a combination of pilates and ballet. It gives some people – not me - a beautiful dancer's body. I try and do it twice a week and I also do yoga every Saturday morning. Watching sport, I'm an Adelaide Crows fan, I love going to the [AFL] footy. And I'm a new fan of the Australian Open [tennis]; we took our son this year for his 21st birthday.

Activity: I've got a gorgeous golden retriever called Easton, he was a guide dog puppy [who didn't pass the training]. I love to walk him in the late afternoon; I think it's my form of meditation.

Getaway: New York. It has to be doesn't it? It's absolutely amazing, I love it.

Indulgence: Haighs chocolate and French champagne, together. And not worrying about eating the whole bag.



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