

“YOU DON’T HAVE TO BE BIG TO BE BOLD”
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Prue Sky, CEO, Community Care (Northern Beaches) Inc.
prue@ccnb.com.au

I want to start by posing a number of questions: What makes a resilient organisation? What makes an innovative organisation? Is size the most important determinant of success? In this competitive industry, is there a level playing field? Are we at risk of the “Macdonaldisation” of community care? And, finally, what might this “size” question mean for the future of the industry?

I’m not going to pretend that I know all the answers to these questions. All I can contend is that they have been questions I have pondered, off and on, during the nineteen years I have worked in the community care sector, and, as I prepare to leave the sector, at least in a full-time capacity, I am indulging in some public reflection.

The title of my presentation – “You don’t have to be big to be bold” immediately discloses my bias and is a mantra by which I have led my organisation. So what do I mean by “big”? When I first started in the industry “big” simplistically meant, to me, any organisation with an annual budget of over \$2 million. “Big” now means to me any organisation with an annual budget of over \$20million. “Big” can also mean an organisation with a wide geographical spread – and interstate, well that is simply huge!! Bold is another concept altogether. **Webster’s dictionary defines Bold as “possessing, showing or requiring courage; audacious; fearless; spirited”**. So, broadly my assertion is **“You don’t have to have a \$20million budget to be courageous and spirited in the provision of community services in 21st century New South Wales”**.

What, then, makes an organisation resilient? Staff are the backbone of any organisation. If staff are engaged, committed, inspired, challenged, and trained, then their loyalty and trust are assured. Once an organisation has loyal and trustworthy staff anything is possible. The organisation I have led for the last fifteen years started with a HACC funded Community Options Project. My first task as Manager (while juggling a case load of thirty clients) was to oversee the incorporation of a new organisation to be named Community Care (Northern Beaches) (CCNB). There were three full-time staff, four part-time staff and a small pool of casual care workers providing some of the direct care to our ninety eight clients. We had a budget of approximately \$600,000 and were located in a small, inaccessible first floor office.

Today, CCNB is a thriving organisation with a Service Delivery Unit comprising a range of seventeen community care projects. Alongside this Unit, is the Planning and Development Unit, which is involved in a range of

research and development activities including: service evaluations; the development, maintenance and auditing of a Quality Management System; participation in a number of research partnerships with industry and academia; the development of specific training packages for use within the sector, and organisational planning activities. Underpinning these units is the Business Administration Unit providing comprehensive “back office” services to the organisation. The foundation of the organisational structure is strongly built allowing the organisation to grow without compromising its structural integrity.

In 2009/2010 our budget is approaching \$8.2 million, almost 80% of which will be spent on services directly for our clients. We work from an accessible suite of offices and meeting rooms in a modern building. We currently have a total of forty staff, twenty five of whom work full-time. Our staff retention rate is phenomenal at over 90% in the last nine years, and recruitment presents few problems. We have just advertised for three new case managers due to expansion, and have 42 applicants, 20 of whom appear to meet all the essential criteria for the positions. Three of the seven permanent staff from 1994 are still employees at CCNB and one former staff member is a member of the Board.

In 2006 the organisation embarked on an ambitious project to construct a performance management system and role competency frameworks. In addition, building on this system, we developed a five year Employee Collective Agreement to replace the Social & Community Services (State) Award. This Agreement was fully consulted and 100% of staff voted for its implementation. The conditions contained in the agreement include salaries linked to the Role Competency Frameworks, annual indexation according to the average of two objective criteria, redundancy provisions, nine weeks paid maternity leave, fortnightly rostered days off for full time staff, long service leave after eight years and various other benefits.

The Role Competency Frameworks, among other things, identify clear requirements to understand the organisational mission, vision and values, and also reflect the importance the organisation places on regular supervision. The investment in supervision, particularly for case management staff, is a vital component of the performance management system, providing regular opportunities to reflect on work-related issues as well as a regular time for individual coaching and mentoring, not to mention a confidential space for the exploration of good ideas to contribute to a best practice model of service provision.

I give you these facts, not to boast, although, admittedly, I am extremely proud of the organisation we have become, but to emphasise that the organisation, and hence the staff, are constantly being challenged to participate in change processes and the ability to adapt to change is a key ingredient in resilience.

And **what about innovation?** To me, this is about having a clear strategic vision, thinking outside the square, focussing on opportunities and being clear about the risks whilst not letting them unduly constrain what you do.

The strategies employed by CCNB over the last fifteen years have involved a number of principles (none of which are “rocket science”):

- **All staff at every level have been involved in every strategic planning process**
- **Regular organisational culture surveys are conducted** to ensure that, as the organisation expands, management staff remain in touch with the ideas, attitudes and concerns of all staff
- **The organisation is aware of its strengths.** Our strategic plans have always been clear in identifying what we are good at and where we should expand. We have rejected as many opportunities as those we have embraced because we simply did not believe we were the best organisation to provide the service being offered, or the timing was not right and hence we may have jeopardised our resilience.
- **The organisation has placed a strong emphasis on continuing to develop our knowledge in our areas of identified expertise.** In our last strategic plan we made a decision to include practice based research activities in our scope in an effort to underpin our practice with a strong evidence base. We have completed several small funded projects and are currently working on an Australian Research Council Linkage Grant application with Macquarie University to further investigate the measurement of outcomes of the case management process. This work, together with a regular cycle of internal project evaluations ensures that, as an organisation, we are kept on our toes. We have determinedly not used our comparatively small size as an excuse not to participate in research and development activities, believing that rather than such activities being a “cost” they are an essential “investment” in our future sustainability.
- **The organisation has had a strong regard for the value of networks, partnerships and connections to the community in which we operate.** This has, in turn, meant that we have taken an extremely conservative view of geographical expansion, preferring to ensure that our base is solid, the community is well-known and understood and that the organisation reflects the community. I have been criticised for this conservatism on a number of occasions and it may well be time to reconsider this stance. Perhaps I really am a control freak and just want to have a hand in (as opposed to a handle on) all aspects of the organisation’s functioning. Time will tell. However, the approach has allowed us to develop a high profile, out of proportion with our overall size, provided us with some significant economies of scale in terms of our infrastructure, and also ensured that there is a strong sense of organisational cohesion together with vital community networks.

So, is organisational size the most important ingredient in being bold? This, if you’ll pardon the pun, is a BIG question? Some years ago I was at a conference put on by NCOSS and a well-respected leader in the ngo sector

asserted, as part of his presentation, that no ngo with a turnover of under \$20 million would be either sustainable at the very least, and certainly not able to deliver the types of services people would need or want in the 21st century. I am aware of a number of organisations which commenced business at around the same time as CCNB and are now at least twice or three times as big. Some operate across NSW, and some throughout Australia, in order to achieve that size. With size, though, goes profile and profile can be important if an organisation wants to influence and lead in reform processes, rather than hanging off the coat-tails of big players in the industry. So how does a smaller organisation develop a positive industry profile. One example comes immediately to mind. About eighteen months ago, an “invitation only” HACC Forum was held in Melbourne providing a think tank around new ways of working in the HACC program. The thinking focussed on independence, enablement, and wellness models as they may relate to the HACC program. CCNB had been thinking, and investigating such concepts for several years. However, only some large service providers in NSW were invited (you can’t invite everyone) and I have to admit to a sense of frustration. Having dealt with that frustration, CCNB flew two staff to Melbourne to attend a follow-up one-day workshop with primarily Victorian service providers, and then ensured that we were part of further discussions in NSW. Today, we are intimately involved in the development of the NSW industry approach, known as IMPACT, presenting the concepts, attending working parties and working closely with DADHC. So whilst big, by its very nature presents opportunity for influence, its not the only way to be influential – knowing and understanding your position and then representing that position in a determined and positive way can ensure that boldness is at least as effective as size.

Do organisations of different size and complexity compete on a level playing field? I don’t think they do but here is not the place to critique competition policy. However, if the playing field is not level, could it just mean you have to be fitter and more nimble in order to negotiate the bumps? There are undeniable advantages in being large in terms of links to the upper echelons of government, in terms of funds devoted to purchasing expertise, and in terms of strategic input to the “big industry picture”. However, “bigness” can also present some challenges. The distance between the strategic thinking and the on-ground service delivery can be so vast that you risk not “practising what you preach”. The concepts presented in your tender may not be realised when it comes to implementation. The theory can be visionary and the systems can be sophisticated but if the implementation process is poorly understood or poorly resourced, the most innovative service provision concept will fail. In order to tackle the uneven terrain of the field on which we play, smaller organisations have to be extremely competitive, very fit and have appropriate equipment. The person writing your tender needs fantastic writing skills but should also actually know and understand your capacity to provide the proposed service and, ideally, also should play a part in its implementation. I believe it is vital for smaller organisations to devote time and resources to fostering such skills in order to even have a chance of competing. A few successes will more than pay for the investment.

So, in one way, having declared my bias at the outset, I have given you a slightly contradictory message. I am clearly affirming that you don't have to be big to be bold. But my concept of big has changed over time. As CCNB has grown, what I once thought was big, no longer feels big and this was reaffirmed by a phone call from DADHC this week wanting to consult with me as a member of a small organisation – and this is a reality. What is not contradictory in my argument is the need to be bold. Boldness, resilience and innovation are what makes a successful organisation, no matter the size. Complacency, resistance to change and negativity are the enemies of any organisation, and whilst a large organisation may be able to obscure such traits, smaller organisations cannot. Smaller organisations need to be excellent in order to thrive not just survive.

So the future of the industry is, to me, a bit of a Pandora's Box. There are more questions than answers. However, I do know that we are part of a growth industry and, as this conference is emphasising, there are major changes ahead. The shift towards consumer directed care, with emphasis on consumer choice and consumers as their own funds holders, presents exciting opportunities for the future and also significant threats to organisations unwilling or unable to offer what consumers are seeking. Will people all want to eat at Macdonalds, or will the diversity of consumer demand ensure a broad menu from which to choose? Will people want the same commodified experience everywhere, or will they require local variation to meet specific needs? There will, no doubt, be some change and some reshaping of organisations in the future, but I do not believe we are moving inevitably towards the "one-size-fits-all" option. What I do believe is that in order to ensure that consumers in the future have the opportunity to choose from a good quality menu with plenty of variety, organisations, be they large, or smaller will need to act boldly.