

Living your values

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Walking the talk is perhaps never more important than when your organisation teaches young people, says Youthtown CEO, Paula Kearns

“At Youthtown, the way that we make a difference in young people’s lives is to incorporate our values - belonging, independence, generosity and mastery – into every aspect of our programme delivery and that means that we also live these values inside our organisation.” says Paula.

The not-for-profit, which runs holiday, after school, and adventure programmes, last year won the Silver Distinguished Award in the YWCA Equal Pay Awards.

Creating a fairer, more engaged workplace through a people and performance focus has been a priority for Paula since she took over as Youthtown CEO four years ago. Staff morale was at a low, with employee engagement scores of 17 percent. Over the last three years, this has risen to 45 percent – the target is 60 percent.

Youthtown now has an overall gender pay gap of 3.1 percent compared to the national average of 12 percent. This is something Paula sees as one part of a broader picture.

“One of our strategic goals is to attract, inspire and develop exceptional people, and we recognise that the way we approach fairness, diversity and inclusion is vital to achieving this. We also work hard to attract culturally diverse staff and work with ethnic communities so we can better understand their needs.”

The organisation, which has a team-based structure, encourages leadership in employees.

“We see all our staff as potential leaders. There’s a learning and career development framework so people who join our organisation know they will be trained, and if opportunities come up they know they will be treated fairly,” says Paula.

She is very conscious that there should be a balance of genders overall, particularly in the senior leadership team (currently with five women and three men).

“Young people on our programme look for role models, they look up to the people leading our teams and delivering our programmes. It is hugely important to have role models of both genders.”

Paula says being a female CEO means, “young girls can see that you can become the boss. They are starting to come through and expect to be future leaders even from a very young age.”

A chartered accountant who has worked for two of the world’s largest accounting firms, Paula has led sporting associations including NZ Football and Canoe Racing NZ. She says her own role model was an aunt whose strong work ethic led her to head a tertiary institution.

“Everyone needs someone like that in their life. She always told me, ‘you can do it.’”

With about 100 permanent staff and 200 casuals, Youthtown is large enough to have an HR department that can set up and monitor a diversity and inclusion policy. However, Paula says, this is not always possible for smaller not-for-profits with fewer resources.

“Although the sector is all about fairness, many not-for-profits just won’t have the capacity to carry out a gender pay gap review. If you are running a charity or not-for-profit with less than 20 employees and many volunteers, you are probably trying to do a million things at once.”

“My advice would be if you haven’t got the capacity or capability in house, then seek some expert advice, or talk to others who have addressed the gap, and do it as part of an overall strategy aimed at fairness and inclusion.”

