

Walk the Talk Award Entrant: Keith Marshall - Careers New Zealand



When Keith Marshall took over the helm of Careers New Zealand, two years ago, it was at a low point. Several months earlier the organisation had been independently assessed as the lowest performing public sector organisation in the country.

Staff described being in the depths of despair, with 40.6 per cent disengaged in their work.

Roll forward two years and the transformation is remarkable. Staff engagement has risen to nearly 80 per cent and Careers New Zealand won the Most Improved Small to Medium Organisation at the 2015 IBM Kenexa Best Workplaces Award. This can be attributed to the inclusive approach that leadership has taken to significantly change the way the organisation operates.

Careers New Zealand employs 121 staff in 13 locations around the country. Its digital tools and resources, and professional development services are providing career information, advice and support to hundreds of thousands of New Zealanders. The organisation's website is expected to receive over four million NZ-based visits this year.

Keith stated at the beginning of his overhaul of Careers NZ, that the process would be guided by three principles - trust, transparency and involvement.

His follow up actions have walked that talk, putting engagement with staff at the centre of all activity. Every key project or issue over the past two years has involved considerable and influential staff input, including setting the strategy and direction; structural alignment;

developing the cultural competency framework; performance management and remuneration systems reviews.

As CEO he urged staff to be open, honest and transparent about the type of organisation they wanted to work in and belong to. This engagement made it possible for all issues to be identified and addressed, and meant that everyone got involved in a trusted and transparent process – an immediate implementation of Keith's three principles.

This engagement led to staff developing 13 statements, which they then signed up to deliver on. These included diversity statements of responsibility to Māori and responsibility to Pasifika.

The strategy and direction process was led by a team of staff from all areas and levels of the organisation. All staff were involved in strategy workshops, creating strong staff buy-in to new strategy.

Keith also put in place specific initiatives to strengthen the influence of diversity. This helped to identify and mitigate unconscious bias in the workplace. The initiatives included establishing Māori and Pasifika staff networks (Te Mana Pou Taurongo and Va Pasifika) and leadership training for all staff.

Te Mana Pou Taurongo and Va Pasifika staff networks each self-select a chair. These chairs sit on the Senior Leadership Team, and have considerable decision-making power on issues impacting on the organisation's responsibility to Māori and responsibility to Pasifika. The establishment and value of this initiative has been recognised across the public sector and Keith is asked to speak to other organisations about it.

In any issue or project involving the workplace Keith ensures that consultation, when it doesn't involve all staff, has good representation reflecting the workforce and wider New Zealand diversity. This includes geographical, ethnic and gender representation in dialogue.

The work has paved the way for a new era for the organisation. Careers New Zealand is now preparing to move to the Tertiary Education Commission. The work done over the past two years will support people through this next stage of the journey and mean the workforce contributes to TEC's diversity.

A final word from just two of the many staff who have benefited from the massive changes in their workplace!

"I've had so much amazing development here, and if I want to give it a go, I'm allowed to... I feel very privileged to be given the opportunity to be developed into my dream job. I have had amazing mentoring, support and trust. Thank you."

"The transformation of this organisation over the last 12 months has been spectacular... moving from the depths of despair to a place that's now inspiring and focused on making a difference. Careers New Zealand has been extremely fortuitous in securing Keith in the position as CE... he is truly an inspirational leader who walks the talk."