

Walk the Talk Award Entrant: Serena Fiso – Connect Global



Serena Fiso's philosophy of recognising enthusiasm and a positive attitude over experience and qualifications, has created employment for many people who would otherwise have limited opportunities for work.

Serena and her husband Siuai established their call centre business, Connect Global, in Porirua in 2003. Their vision was to help empower the local Maori and Pacific Island communities by creating a profitable and viable business model, creating wealth, encouraging education and employment as well as business opportunities.

As a family-owned business, Connect Global's philosophies and business practices are closely aligned to Serena and Siuai's family values. This gives the business possibly its biggest point of difference. Staff and clients comment often about the family feel and connection that is felt in the business. This has contributed a higher than average retention rate and team commitment to success as they believe they belong to the organisation rather than just being another employee.

Just over 50 per cent of connect Global's workforce is under 25. Ethnically, 40 per cent are Pacific and 30 per cent are Maori.

Serena's work has been recognised in a reference from Te Raumawhitu Kupenga, the Deputy Secretary for the Environment, who commended Serena as a great business woman who has successfully grown a business to help a community.

He also commented on Serena's focus on training and developing Maori and Pacific women in the business, many of whom come from vulnerable backgrounds. 85% of employees are female. At management level: 77% are female. Serena strives to ensure that the company's leadership team is diverse to ensure that gender, cultural and generational understanding is present in all managerial activities

"Serena is an innovative leader, says Te Raumawhitu. She has an entrepreneurial spirit and constantly develops and models ideas which feed into her vision, passion and drive for success for her people. Her attitude is not to see obstacles, but rather to see stepping stones and launch pads for greater success. This attitude is a core attribute of a great leader," he says.

Employee Norman Toelafoa, who is Assistant Genesis Energy Coach, talks of the satisfaction he gains from his job. "I find joy in knowing that I am helping create a better future for my home town of Porirua, by opening doors that couldn't be opened for many people and creating chances and opportunities that were possibly very limited or scarce in my small home town. By doing this I feel we can slowly grow towards a bigger goal of creating life change opportunities and working together as a solid unit to create results." Prior to working at the call centre, Norman worked in manual labouring jobs.

Serena has also taken her vision outside of Porirua, to help another community with huge employment challenges. This year she opened a call centre in the East Coast town of Ruatoria, initially employing 14 people. With a population of around 750, and unemployment at 18%, with a median income of \$17,000, the jobs are a big deal.

Vanessa Ngarimu, who is employed at the call centre, said she was grateful that someone had faith in the community. "It is not that we do not want to work. We just don't want to leave this paradise." I see a bright future for us all, may our connections continue to grow and be forever strong, mauriora." The next step is a call centre in South Taranaki.

Serena is also active in other leadership roles in the Porirua community. She and Siuai have commitment to a local employment programme called Youth 2 Work which encourages employers to provide opportunities for Porirua's significant youth population. For many years Siuai has been a trustee of the local organisation, Partners Porirua, which aims to motivate young people for the working world.

The company has been recognised by the Porirua Chamber of Commerce Awards in a number of categories including Supreme Winner. One of their employees, Alosina Parsons, was the winner of the Young Employee Award.