

Walk the Talk Award Entrant: Anne Marie Taggart – Customs New Zealand

Video Link: <https://vimeo.com/141140904>

Breaking down Borders. Customs is New Zealand's oldest government department, this year marking its 175th anniversary of protecting New Zealand's borders. Customs employ approximately 1,200 staff spread across the country and are located at all of New Zealand's international airports and sea ports. Customs staff are proud of its history, traditions and the work they do. Many of the workforce are long serving, with 22 per cent having over 20 years' service. Historically, Customs staff have predominantly been male and European. Looking at the demographics of present employees, there is a much more diverse range of ethnicities, backgrounds and ages with females now representing over 40 per cent of Customs workforce.

When Anne Marie Taggart joined the organisation in 2012 she recognised the need to increase the gender balance and diversity of their leaders. Since then, she has been championing increasing diversity and inclusion at Customs in her role as Group Manager People and Capability.

Anne Marie brought the diversity and inclusion conversation to the Senior Leadership Team table. In late 2013 she commissioned research to understand the experiences of female leaders at Customs to inform their discussions. She has built strong relationships with her Senior Leadership Team colleagues and successfully brought them on board by being able to clearly state the business case for diversity. This has led the development of Customs' Diversity and Inclusion Council, four year diversity and inclusion strategy, and implementation plan. Anne Marie is an active member of the Diversity and Inclusion Council and has led a number of the initiatives the Council has implemented - for example, introducing the celebration of International Women's Day at Customs.

Early in her role at Customs, Anne Marie took on an advocacy role to ensure a returning female Chief Customs Officer was able to return from parental leave in a part time capacity. Previously, there were no part time leader roles at Customs. Bill Perry, Deputy Comptroller Operations, says "Anne Marie's advocacy for people leaders to be able to work flexibly challenged our thinking. As a result we now have a number of leaders working reduced hours and I can see that it can work successfully and bring benefits to both Customs and staff". Sam, one of the first people leaders to work reduced hours, says "I decided that I didn't want to return from parental leave in a full time capacity - and I was quite prepared to return at a lower rank if it meant I could reduce my hours. It was that important to me. Three months out from returning from leave I made contact with Customs to start discussing my options and I couldn't really believe it when I got the chance to return on reduced hours - as, from my understanding, it had never before been an option within Customs at the Chief Customs Officer level".

Anne Marie also led the change in Customs' flexible working policy and continues to advocate for staff to be able to work flexibly. She has two of the five members of her own leadership team successfully working flexible arrangements. Bryn says "As a member of the leadership team some might assume that the ability to work flexibly is constrained by the requirements of my role. Through the attitude and support of Anne Marie, my reality is

entirely the opposite. I work four days a week, of which one day I work at home. From a business perspective I suspect most would be unaware of these arrangements, as my accessibility is fundamentally unaffected by working part-time and remotely”.

Anne Marie's attitude to flexible working of 'if it can work...make it happen' in contrast to a default position - that is still too common - of 'that can't work' is truly a forward-thinking asset. Anne-Marie has led Customs' on its diversity and inclusion journey and has had a significant impact on the organisation as well as individual staff members. In her three years at Customs, Anne Marie has lived the leadership principles by “taking ownership” and “doing what's right”. She is positively changing Customs' culture to one of inclusiveness and that can only be a good thing for the organisation, its people and the people it serves.