

Working to Evolve

The Victorian WorkCover Authority (VWA) is not resting on its laurels. Despite its long-held record as the safest state with the lowest premiums, the VWA is continuing to challenge itself and evolve.

Images by Estelle Judah Photography

Directing organisational change has been Denise Cosgrove's key objective since joining the VWA as CEO in late 2012. As a vital supporter of injured workers and employers, the VWA plays a critical role in workplaces across the state. To ensure the organisation continues to meet its responsibilities and be a sustainable scheme in the future, Denise has been working with teams across the VWA and with external stakeholders to set strategic goals and efficiently meet them.

The CEO Magazine recently spoke to Denise about how she's redirected and reenergised the VWA to ensure it continues to lead the way for workplace safety.

***The CEO Magazine:* When you first came to the VWA in November 2012, you identified there was a need to change-up the organisation. Can you outline the tough decisions you had to make and how you are transforming the company?**

Denise: The organisation has been hugely successful. The previous

management did a good job of focusing the organisation on managing the scheme and liability. Now Victoria is one of the most successful workers' compensation schemes in Australia, and in some cases internationally as well. It's the safest state, it has the lowest premiums, and a lot of effort has been made around the state's performance in getting injured workers back to safe work as soon as they can.

However, sometimes when you're that successful, it's hard to challenge yourself and get to that next level of change and improvement. There's always more that can be done for injured workers and for employers. What I've done in the past is come in and implement what I call 'disruptive innovation', which really means stimulating new thinking about old problems.

An example of the sort of disruptive innovation I've implemented in a previous role was where I needed to get a step change in the performance of the management of long-term clients. I introduced some external benchmarking by choosing a small cohort of claims, 600 of them, and

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giving them to five externally managed claims agents. I wanted to see if they could do it better than we could internally, and if we could learn from that. It really lifted our game because it challenged our internal people and provoked innovation. One agent ended up slightly higher than us—we ranked second. I believe that this ability to stimulate new ways of working was really the reason for my appointment: to deliver the next level of improvement for the Victorian community.

In your view, what are the key principles and vision that drive your leadership approach?

The VWA's vision is to help Victorian workers get home safe every day. This absolutely galvanises our staff and the community. What I really want is an organisation that delivers on that vision and helps more injured workers and more employers. With employers, it's all about helping them improve safety and the return to work of employees. There's two sides: one is the things they've got to do with their employees to keep their workplaces safe, and they're regulated in that regard; and the other side is when they have >



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people that get injured, that they work together to get their people back to safe work as soon as they are able. We want to help them do that in a way that doesn't bind everyone up in red tape and take longer than it needs to, and in a way that's educative and informative.

With injured workers, there's so much evidence that the longer a worker is away from work, the harder it is for them to get back into work. Based on our own data, if you're off work for 70 days, there's only a 35-per-cent chance that you'll ever return to work.

Research from the UK has found that young men who are off work for more than six months are more likely to suffer from suicide and depression. The sad fact is that the longer you're away from work, the more risk you face to your health.

While our organisation has had really good performance for a long period of time and enjoys great relationships with stakeholders, under the surface when I took over there were some concerning signs. The rate of people returning to work after six months was still not at levels that it had been pre-GFC. And, yes, overall claims numbers had fallen, but if you really analysed it, those were the more minor claims. For the ones which were longer term, the rate had not changed in five years.

How do you manage the political pressures, and do they impact on your ability to do the job?

I suppose because I've always worked in government-related organisations, I've always seen the political side as part of the deal. I've never seen it as a constraint because, to me, it's a necessary part of the system that you work within. You have to understand the

government's policy-reform position and implement it effectively while ensuring you are also reflecting the needs of your other stakeholders, your board, and the community.

I think that's what I find quite exciting about my job: juggling the social and commercial objectives, and influencing and implementing policy reform. The political side is just another interesting dynamic in the mix.

Coming from the HR side of business, how do you challenge the people in your organisation and set a cohesive culture?

There's a lot said about visible change leadership, and, while that's undoubtedly important, I believe that you also need to give people ways to change and do things differently. One of the initiatives I brought in when I took on the CEO role at the VWA was create mechanisms to drive innovation and collaboration. You give people a forum and a way to do that. You can't just tell people to collaborate with another department or innovate, because people don't know what that looks like. They naturally think they do it already.

I set up this concept which was focused on the four key areas of our Strategy 2017: safety, service, return to work, and sustainability. Largely, in all of these areas, our strategy is about achieving a 10- to 15-per-cent improvement in the results and the performance in those areas over the five-year period of the strategy.

The first thing I did, initially internally and then with external people, was run workshops. This really comes from my HR background. With my executive team, I gave them four big, blank sheets of paper for each of the four key areas. I asked them to brainstorm the big things that are going to help us to achieve that 10- to 15-per-cent improvement target, and then got them to prioritise the top initiatives. I then ran these forums with all the senior leaders, around 70 of them, in small groups >

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of about 20, and similarly with our key external stakeholders. From those forums, we have been able to generate two to three more focused, key initiatives for each strategy area which we are now working on. We all try to do too many things, but, at the end of the day, if you do that, it's impossible to achieve them all—and you can never attribute which ones had made an impact.

How have you implemented technological innovations for the VWA ?

Like most organisations, technology is a key part of providing great service to your customers and working efficiently.

I think what might surprise you is that the Victorian scheme is largely paper based. I'd come from pretty much a paperless company, so when I got here and they were showing me these massive rooms full of files, I was really surprised, but excited about the opportunities. Similarly, our systems are getting old, and over the years we've customised them quite a bit.

We're working with our agents and looking at ways we can innovate together. We don't want to tell them how to do it. They may go off and explore their own ideas, and we want them to do that. We want to encourage those technological innovations.

What's in store for the VWA down the track?

There's a lot of change happening. We've got groups, or 'pods', throughout the organisation that are focusing on how we can effectively optimise and streamline our processes. Government policy-driven initiatives are also providing opportunities, and we are excited about the government's strong vision for a Centre of Excellence in Insurance, with the recent election commitment by the Victorian Premier to move 550 roles to Geelong. The VWA has the chance to play a lead role in this with the Transport Accident

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Commission (TAC) and the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA), and we are positioning ourselves to be able to take advantage of this, if the coalition government is re-elected in November.

Being a CEO is obviously a tough role, and juggling work and family life is a struggle for many. How do you unwind and relax?

Always prioritising 'space' for yourself is critical. I'm a bit of fitness fanatic, and what works for me is to have my time to exercise because it allows me to reflect. It's just my two daughters and I, and I've raised them alone since my youngest was three months old and now she's 17. We're a team, so I want to spend time with them doing the things we want to do on the weekends. So I'm very deliberate about how I create that headspace. Mostly, I unwind at the gym—for me that's my best thinking time. While I exercise I think through all the things I've

got to do during the day and plan my priorities and goals.

I also get involved in community-related activities outside work. One thing I'm really passionate about at the moment is working with a group called Marae Melbourne, and we're building a Marae for Victoria, and Australia. A marae is a meeting place, but it's broader than that—it's an infrastructure and network for anyone who is, or wants to be, connected to New Zealand. It's a sense of place and identity. I've been honoured to work with the group to provide strategic leadership and drive how we're going to fill our kete [basket] of resources to build and sustain the marae. We're holding a gala fundraiser for Matariki [Maori New Year] in early July, which will be an amazing event focusing on encouraging support from major corporates. It's fun and energising to do things completely outside of your work—and hugely rewarding. ●

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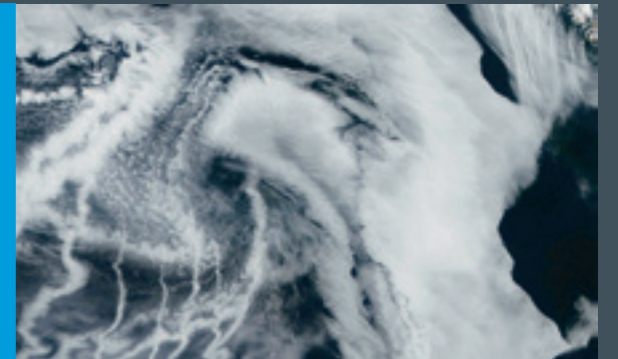
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