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TO STRIKE A CHORD

Social entrepreneur Tania de Jong tells Lucinda Schmidt about the power of song

IT'S 5.30 on a Tuesday evening at a posh Melbourne-CBD hotel and 50 people are gathered to sing. They're a diverse bunch; Chinese immigrants from inner-city housing estates stand next to business executives, while Beth, who has cerebral palsy, beams and laughs from a wheelchair in the front row.

The choir, called Melbourne Sings, is the brainchild of singer and social entrepreneur Tania de Jong. She launched it in March last year, as the first initiative of her not-for-profit

Creativity Australia venture, which aims to link disadvantaged groups with corporate Australia to promote inclusiveness, well-being and innovation. "The most important thing is to bring people together to create social capital," says de Jong, who also founded The Song Room a decade ago to bring music to disadvantaged children.

Since Melbourne Sings began, de Jong has established choirs in outer suburbs such as Sunshine and Dandenong, which have big

To strike a chord *continued*

migrant populations, as well as one for staff of The Royal Children's Hospital. There's a waiting list of communities wanting to join. Next on de Jong's busy agenda is a "how-to" guide, so Creativity Australia's choir program, *With One Voice*, can be launched nationally.

De Jong, who trained as a classical soprano after studying law, says her desire to make a difference stems from being bullied at school. "I was different, Jewish, I felt quite ostracised. It's taken me a long time to get comfortable with who I am and be proud of what I've achieved."

On this particular Tuesday night, it's clear she is making a difference to the lives of many of the choir members, who range in age from 16 to 85 and come from 14 countries. For Beth, getting a taxi into the city each Tuesday is the only activity she does by herself. For several of the older Chinese migrants, it's the only time they use English in public. For Elok Nur, an engineer with Exxon Mobil who moved to Melbourne from Jakarta eight months ago, it's about meeting people. "I don't sing that well," she confesses. "But it's not so much about singing as about sharing a love for life." She's become friends with Irene, the keyboard player, whose day job is as an accountant for David Hains' Portland House hedge fund.

It's also about those who have the skills and contacts using them to help those who don't. An executive shares his copy of *The Australian Financial Review* away so a student

can read an article on in-house recruiting. Sue, a corporate governance specialist, has agreed to record her voice reading for Diana, who teaches translation. Last year, Nathalie, from the Cameroons, practised mock interviews with two of the choir's HR specialists to land her first Australian job.

Halfway through the evening's session, choir leader Shaun calls for a break: "Ladies and gentlemen, find someone new, talk to them and find out something about them." There's another chance to mingle at the end, over sandwiches, fruit salad, spring rolls and cakes, which the Sofitel Hotel provides free. "I meet people I'd never otherwise meet and share their joy – and perhaps help them in a small way," says Peter, an executive recruiter.

"It's about practising diversity, not just talking about it," de Jong says. "You have to take people out of their comfort zone to change their thinking."

REVERT

JARGON BUSTER

IT IS AN OLDIE-BUT-BADDIE. REVERT ACTUALLY MEANS TO TURN BACK OR RETURN TO FORMER WAYS, BELIEFS OR PRACTICES. AND WE'RE, UM, REVERTING TO BAD HABITS, AS IN THESE WE'VE HEARD LATELY: "I WILL CHECK AND REVERT TO YOU" OR "APOLOGIES FOR NOT REVERTING BACK TO YOU SOONER".



OUT IN THE AIR

ON A chilly winter night in June, senior executives from around the country will sleep rough on the streets for the annual St Vincent de Paul CEO Sleepout. In 2009, the chief operating officer of InterContinental Hotels, Bruce McKenzie, was one of more than 200 business leaders who slept in Sydney's Luna Park. "Most of us woke up early and went to sleep late," he says. "I wouldn't call it a great night's sleep."

They raised \$620,000 for the charity's homelessness services. "Not bad for one night's work," Housing Minister Tanya Plibersek says. On June 17, Vinnies will take the CEO Sleepout national for the first time and hopes to raise \$1 million.

Chief executive of Staging Connections, Tony Chamberlain, says CEO Sleepout gave him a greater understanding of some of the causes of homelessness. He found an unexpected benefit, too: "Part of being a good leader is having empathy and understanding those around you and on your team. Doing something like this can enhance your leadership in that way for sure."

You can register online at www.ceosleepout.org.au

Jessica Gardner

MIGRANT MOVES 2008-09

171,318 migrants processed

114,777 skilled migrants

56,366 family reunion migrants

13,507 refugees accepted

L to R; Dr. John Falzon, CEO St Vincent de Paul Society; Tony Chamberlain, CEO Staging Connections Group; Tony Stuart, Group CEO NRMA; Bruce McKenzie, COO Inter-Continental Hotels Group; Bernard Fehon, CFP Tactical Solutions.

GAME CHANGERS

COMPUTER GAMES get bad press for being an unhealthy, addictive activity. Excessive time with multiplayer games has been blamed for everything from obesity to antisocial behaviour.

But Jane McGonigal, director of game research and development at the Institute of the Future in California, has a radical counter idea: she thinks we can use the power of online gaming to help solve real-world problems. In a recent talk on Ted.com, she argues that we "achieve more in game worlds. We are motivated to do something that matters, inspired to collaborate and co-operate."

She believes "many of us become the best version of ourselves; the most likely to help at a moment's notice [or] get up after failure and try again".

McGonigal shows a photographic image of an astounded gamer on the verge of an "epic win" — a sense of extreme excitement and amazement as they crack something they thought was impossible.

She believes that we can transfer this sense of unlimited possibility from the screen of a PC to reality. McGonigal creates games that teach resourcefulness, sustainability, creativity and

knowledge networking. Her latest release is Urgent Evoke (urgentevoke.com), designed in collaboration with the World Bank Institute. Evoke helps empower young people to create innovative solutions to social problems. Another creation is World Without Oil (worldwithoutoil.org), which simulates the first 32 weeks of an oil crisis.

"Gamers are a human resource that we can use to do real-world work," McGonigal argues. "Games are a powerful platform for change, and we can make any future that we imagine."

Kimberley Church



GURU:

A GUIDE TO THE UNWRITTEN LAWS OF THE WORKPLACE

DEAR BOSS

Q: Between the Easter full-moon cycle, holidays and taking the kids to the dawn service, I'm beat. Initially, it was a relief to get back to work. But it seems "fool" moon syndrome continues. Now that we're all finally catching our breath, they're wheeling in the consultants. Sure I've seen it all before (you know the drill: we select a few of their pathetic recommendations, then mostly nothing changes and they go away lugging the cash). Usually I can cope — but this year they say we can't run and hide. Tell me it isn't so?

A: C-suite, consultants, contraction: why is it that so many scary corporate words start with C? Well might you be quaking in your Windsor Smith lace-ups. The dark suits huddled in the corner office are no fun in any climate. In fact, there must be a collective noun for these unsavoury characters? A kaleidoscope, crash or cloud of consultants (with apologies to giraffes, rhinos and bats). They all have a pleasing alliterative effect.

At any rate, these stoney-faced types never fail to make the office shrink in on itself. All those clipboards, secretive meetings behind glass walls and the extra squeeze in the staff carpark are enough to make anyone nervous. Did your bosses sell it as a necessary strategic move that would capitalise on the hard lessons learned from the downturn? Oh yeah — heard that one before.

Look, the best way to handle this is to ensure your job appears indispensable, and make it clear you'd be far too much trouble to get rid of. Be Johnny on the spot. Bombard them with statistics. Grab every opportunity — in the lift, in the coffee queue, in the loo. Bite the bullet and don't leave the office before 7pm when they're in residence. And if the proverbial appears to be rising towards the fan, remember "C" also stands for the Caribbean, Costa Rica and Colorado. This could be a good year for that six-month sabbatical.

Yours, BOSS Guru

Got a workplace gripe? Or a thorny dilemma you need help with? Email us at boss@afrr.com.au