

John Ballard is a CEO who takes care of staff and patients seriously

JOHN BALLARD, AHRI CEO of the year, makes a mean pancake, he flipped hundreds of them for staff at Mercy Health on Shrove Tuesday this year. That act encouraged other staff to contribute with their own initiatives over the Easter period. Cooking skills aside, Ballard's win at this year's AHRI awards is testament to Mercy Health's six-year journey towards its goal to be considered an employer of choice.

"We are in a service industry and as a health organisation the quality of care we deliver is down to the people. All of the Western world is experiencing a shortage of medical and allied health staff. And many prefer to work part-time. Attracting and retaining committed, passionate people is central to our business," explains Ballard, a 20-year veteran of health organisations.

"It's an environment where people choose the employer rather than the other way round. It's critically important that we have people choose us. Part of our journey was committed to creating an inclusive and just workplace as part of our wider agenda of creating an inclusive and just society."

Ballard and his team set clear targets around how to achieve employer of choice status. Almost 90 per cent of Mercy's 4500-strong workforce are women. "It wasn't a demonstrably equitable environment. So we set an aggressive strategy to make this a better place for people to work and to achieve their best. We had to examine how to cater for a workplace where the majority

of the workforce still has childbearing and child-raising responsibilities."

Working closely with Kate McCormack, director people, learning and culture, Ballard plotted an aggressive strategy with the aim of building retention and increasing worker satisfaction. McCormack became HR director with Ballard's full encouragement and support. "I remember him telling me it's a journey, we would have fun, work hard and he would support me throughout it. He has lived up to the promise," she says.

One of the initiatives sponsored by Ballard was the Parent's Network, regular lunches for staff on maternity leave to enable them to learn more about parenting and stay connected with each other and the workplace while on leave. As a result of the network, and the organisation's flexible work options, the overall return rate from parental leave is 97 per cent.

When an analysis of sick leave data revealed a higher usage during school holiday periods, Ballard introduced and financially supported the School Holiday Program, resulting in a reduction in sick leave and in

agency usage.

Today staff turnover is less than 2 per cent. There are now five female board directors to six men. When Ballard became CEO the ratio was two women to eight. There is significant investment in training and education, the culture is routinely measured and communications are open.

Ballard says the culture at Mercy is now symbiotic, passionate and compassionate. "If it wasn't those things we would not be able to deliver. If you don't care for the carers you can't deliver good care. It doesn't matter whether you are the neurosurgeon, the scrub nurse, the pay clerk or the person that chucks the rubbish out, it's truly symbiotic, because the surgeon cannot deliver unless someone else in the organisation cleans the theatres.

One of the things Ballard believes his people would say about him that he freely shares knowledge. "I know they would say that I would deliver the good and the bad news. I think that's really important, so many people just want to deliver the good news and will delegate the bad news to someone else. And they might say I do a good pancake." ●

A HEALTHY WORK ENVIRONMENT

Lynda Gratton CEO of the Year
WINNER: JOHN BALLARD MERCY HEALTH

"THE CULTURE AT MERCY IS NOW SYMBIOTIC, PASSIONATE AND COMPASSIONATE"



L to R: Ann Whyte- Whyte & Coaches (sponsor), John Ballard, Mercy Health, Peter Wilson, AHRI, national president