



Qantas The Australian Way July, 2023

Page: 150
Section: General News
Region: National, AU
Type: Magazines Lifestyle
Size: 1,071.00 sq.cms.

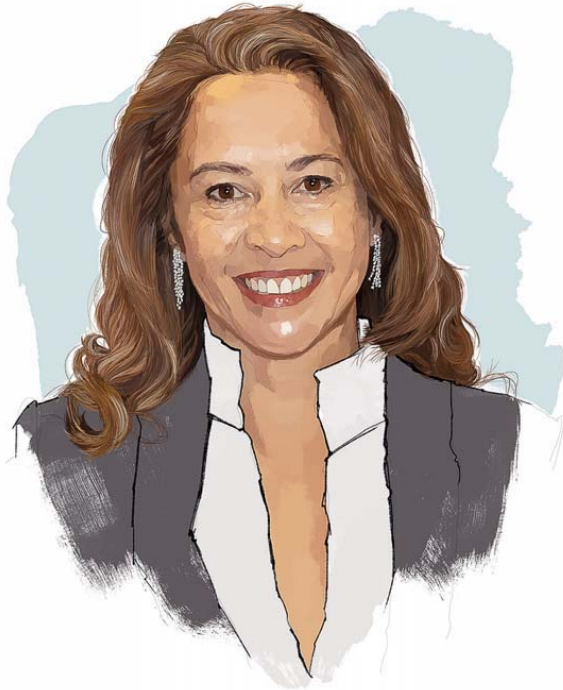
press clip

INNOVATE

View From The Top

INTERVIEW BY KIRSTEN GALLIOTT
ILLUSTRATION BY MARC NÉMORIN

50



Jennifer Mar Young
The CareerTrackers CEO is a Kamilaroi woman with Chinese heritage who's dealt with racism and bias throughout her career. But she remains optimistic.

How do you define good leadership?

I've been fortunate to learn from some amazing Aboriginal leaders, who have taught me about the importance of service. Leadership is not a top-down exercise and should always be for a greater good, unselfish and without ego.

That sounds wonderful but also hard.

If you think about leadership, it's different for a woman than it is for a man. From a racially marginalised position, it's different again. There are multiple layers.

You've told me you learnt more lessons working within Aboriginal affairs than outside it. Why?

Sometimes you're not going with the flow – you're swimming upstream. It can be difficult because you're dealing with bias in the workplace as well as your daily job.

Presumably it's given you a lot of resilience?

Yes, but sometimes you have to rest. It can be really hard going and there have been a few times in my career when I've walked away because I wasn't having the impact.

CareerTrackers organises internships for First Nations university students at some of our biggest companies. You've been CEO for 18 months now. Is it a place where you've felt more optimistic?

Yes. Justice and community services are very different environments but, by and large, education is empowering and employment is empowering.

CURRENT ROLE **CEO, CareerTrackers**
TENURE **18 months**
AGE **48**
PREVIOUS ROLES **Director, client relationships, Arrilla Indigenous Consulting; senior manager, PwC's Indigenous Consulting; director, Aboriginal outcomes, NSW Department of Family and Community Services**



Qantas The Australian Way July, 2023

Page: 150
Section: General News
Region: National, AU
Type: Magazines Lifestyle
Size: 1,071.00 sq.cms.

press clip

One statistic suggests a third of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students don't make it to graduation. Is that right?

Retention is a big issue for Aboriginal tertiary students. The CareerTrackers program assists by connecting the world of work and study. Our experience is that students who join the program early in their degree do better at their studies because they've made that leap into the workplace early. Then they can grow their skills each year with the same employment partner.

Can you tell me about the ripple effect you see at CareerTrackers?

Family is everything, ultimately. While Indigenous families and communities across the nation have differences in culture, languages and experiences, there's a lot of commonality and one of those things is the importance of community, belonging and sharing. That sharing extends to success and achievement. The saying goes, "You can't be what you can't see." Conversely the opposite is also true, "You can be what you can see."

There's something powerful about someone coming back into the community and sharing that success, isn't there?

We have an alumni of 1100, which is the largest professional network of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the country. There's a strong desire by our alumni to give back in some way, shape or form.

First Nations people make up just over 3 per cent of the population but have traditionally been under-represented in the workplace.

Are we seeing a change now? Is there momentum?

The reconciliation movement has been beneficial because it's created greater consciousness about how Aboriginal people have been excluded from education and employment. People have gotten very good at doing "entry level" – like what we're doing – but we need to do more if we're going to see change.

What sort of heavy lifting do you think corporate Australia should do?

I would like to see corporate Australia think broadly about what Aboriginal employment success actually is. Is it just success that you achieve within your workplace or are you talking about broader societal success and what that means for the communities in which we have a footprint? I don't think corporates are ready to have that conversation yet.

It feels sometimes as though companies tick off the Reconciliation Action Plan requirements and then think they're done.

We've got great employment partners, like Herbert Smith Freehills. As a legal firm, perhaps they have that lens because they understand the impact that the legal system has had on Aboriginal people and that's part of their "why". I think there's a willingness but some of our corporate partners don't quite know what it takes to support career development for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

What does it take?

Well, I don't think we've asked enough questions. There's a bit of a void. I want to work with our partners to fill that void and support the career life cycle. Closing gaps and parity are only part of where we want to be. Why can't we be like the AFL or NRL? If there were no Aboriginal people in those codes, the

game would be very different. They make up 12 to 15 per cent of players – that's amazing for a population of only 3 per cent – because they've had the right opportunities and the right coaching and the right environments. Who's to say that's not possible for the workplace?

Is there an issue with the way corporate Australia tends to engage with First Nations people?

I've been really impressed by their contribution to embracing Aboriginal employees. But there is a bit of fear. A lot of people don't know any Aboriginal people and that fear comes from a lack of understanding and that leads to a lack of confidence and then feeling a level of discomfort. It's important for corporate partners to work through that discomfort.

It's knowing what to do with that discomfort, isn't it?

It's okay to not get it right. But when companies haven't got their "why" straight, they might think, "Oh, we'll hire Aboriginal people – that will fix it." No. We want students to go into your workplaces and learn and get valuable, meaningful workplace experiences. They're not there to educate you. If they do, that's great but that shouldn't be an obligation. They're not there to solve a representation or a competency issue within a workplace. Our people will vote with their feet if they feel that's the case or if they feel tokenistic.

What would you consider your greatest strength as a leader?

Empowering others to do well and wanting them to succeed. I also like to think I bring a sense of humour to the workplace – sometimes you need to do that as well.

And what would you say is your biggest gap?

I suspect here are many unsaid and unwritten things I just don't know. Would my experience or progression have been different if I'd gone to the "right" school, if I'd been a man, if I'd been white? I'll never know. Sometimes I've felt that workplaces weren't designed for people like me. There have been times when I've felt expectations drop and assumptions rise when I walk into the room. I've had to navigate that and learn to back myself more than other people would back me.

When it's so personal all the time, how do you switch off?

You don't really. The racism is really tough. Having people around you who you can lean on and who understand where you're coming from is important. Having non-Aboriginal people around is important, too.

How do you look after your own mental health?

I'm pretty mentally resilient. I get a lot of strength from my racial identity, which is also Chinese. I can lean in to being Chinese and it's easy – it's an easy place for me to rest. And I'm really optimistic, despite it all.

What advice would you give a brand-new CEO?

Use the first few months to get the lay of the land as much and as quickly as possible so you can make the most of opportunities as well as defend actions. Have some people around you who can support you during your first 12 months. And [laughs] don't go on holidays for a little while. ●