



Chewying's Lawn & Horticulture

Chewying's Lawn and Horticulture is a service providing quality lawn and garden care in the Shoalhaven region in NSW. However, the business is more than a gardening service. The 12 year old business has evolved into a business model for mainstreaming marginalised workers into employment with the option of their own business. They specialise in employing people whom many employers pass by. Chewying's Lawn and Horticulture provides opportunities for Indigenous people, welfare recipients, people with a disability, the aged or long term unemployed to become business people in their own long term right. Robert facilitates the skill of lawn and horticulture, but also practical aspects such as business skills, computer skills and customer service. Above all, the business creates an environment to allow all staff to flourish at their own pace. Chewying's Lawn and Horticulture has demonstrated that it is possible to develop a viable and highly competitive business that is also socially responsible. Robert's empathy comes from his own disability and pride in his Indigenous lineage.



The Story So Far...

As a person with Bipolar Disorder, Robert Chewying and his wife Melinda had to design a business that accommodated his disability and family needs. Fundamentally, any business experience had to ensure limited stress, yet provide an adequate income for the family. The business had to be able to respond to forces that traditional businesses do not experience, namely –

- working less not more;

- allowing flexibility to change work days and hours wanted; and
- growing slowly to enable familiarisation before taking another step.

The Chewyings achieved these needs through the creation of a lawn and horticulture business in 1992. Since then, they have developed a first class reputation for quality service, and the business has seen significant patronage and expansion. As the business grew, it has also had to employ staff, and cope with the needs of employees. As the business evolved, they began to realise that the system they were developing could benefit other people that were in a similar situation (unemployed, on welfare, people with a disability). They then set out to build a business whose primary purpose was to provide a bridging tool for Indigenous people and people with disabilities to move from welfare or funded employment (e.g. CDEP) into mainstream employment with award wages and conditions.

The challenges that the Chewyings faced were enormous. They had no resources that could help with this type of construction apart for their own experience. There were no models that they could copy and there were few people that they could talk to. They designed their system simply on what they thought was the right way. *‘Determination, “pig headedness” and belief to keep going when the situation got grim played the major role of the success of the business today’*, were Robert's words for their achievement.

The Chewyings simply set out to prove the critics wrong. They believed that all people should have the opportunity to *‘experience what it feels like to stand on their own two feet and to talk to people and not feel worthless, to be paid a wage that was better than most and to not work long hours.’*

Robert believed (and still believes) that government or other funding is a trap. It meant that he would have to be accountable to others. To Robert, this destined that his spirit would be diminished and would create limitations in creating the model. The Chewyings did not want to be scrutinized. They wanted to be a free thinkers, and creators of a

business that could grow organically. They wanted the freedom to take on work when they wanted to.

The more they failed in areas within the business, the more determined they became. The more the critics said it could not be done - the more Robert and Melinda set out to prove it could be done. As they traveled down this road, their thoughts lead them to the belief that their model could be used in the wider community. The only challenge was that their motivation was starting to diminish. They were becoming burnt out and needed support. The question was how or who could help them move this idea forward. In 2001, Robert befriended Peter Botsman. Peter was of like mind and well known in the social entrepreneurship field, and this gave them a '*second wind*' to keep going.

Today, Robert and Melinda have a business that is basic, but very viable. They know it has the potential to expand to other regions and industries. Their current challenge is to explore the possibilities of developing a social franchise arrangement.

In his own words, Robert captures their journey – '*From being determined and sticking to our beliefs, we now earn a good living and have a wonderful lifestyle working in an industry we love. I have a fantastic life with my wife and two daughters, and now I feel that I can take the next step in constructing the business*'.

Impact of the Business

Chewyings Lawn and Horticulture has grown substantially since its origins 12 years ago when the Chewyings started with only \$300. The business has tripled in turnover and business processes are becoming easier to operate. During summer, the business supports up to seven staff, and in winter up to five staff. Within the Shoalhaven region, Chewyings' Lawn and Horticulture has achieved a reputation and recognition for the quality of their service.



The business employs long-term unemployed and people with disabilities. According to Peter Botsman, the impact of their business on the local community is incredibly positive. Feedback from family members of employed staff is most positive. Writing in *The Australian*, Peter Botsman comments on the letters that the Chewyings regularly receive – *‘letters from parents of their employees. Full of praise, they state quite simply that working for the Chewyings business has given the children hope, a new start, qualifications and independence.’* (Botsman 2003, p11)

Over the last 5 years, the business has achieved considerable recognition. Firstly, for the outcomes regarding staff development have been considerable, both in terms of skill and personal development. Secondly, the business it has been profiled in *The Australian* newspaper and the Indigenous Stock Exchange. It has received numerous awards for employing people with disabilities. The business has also received 4 star accreditation from Micro Navigator, the first Indigenous business to achieve such accreditation. Micro Navigator is a business system that recognises certain small business procedures, so potential lenders, philanthropists or supporters can be confident the business has achieved certain objectives.

The impact and potential of Chewying’s Lawn and Horticulture is best summarized by Peter Botsman – *‘Robert Chewying and his family have created a pathway in business to what Noel Pearson calls “the real economy”. Developed around his own inspiring example, Robert’s portfolio work strategy builds confidence, capability and strength. Let us hope that one day soon there is the equivalent of a Chewying’s Lawn and Horticulture in every Australian community economy’.*

Success Factors

Robert Chewyng attributes their success so far to six critical factors.

- **Determination**

Peter Botsman summarises well Robert's spirit – *'Rob's journey mirrors that of his employees . . . it is a journey of small steps. After being labelled with the stigma of mental illness, it took many years for Rob to summon up the courage to knock on a door and ask if he could mow a lawn. He and Melinda rustled together \$250 to buy their first mower. They would work on any job. Every time someone told him he couldn't run a business, he became more determined to create something for himself and his family, and to create opportunities for others. Over decades Rob's small steps have become strides.'* (ibid, p11)

- **Business design and control**

Designing the business around lifestyle and personal ability was essential. The business is a reflection of the Chewyng family life in many ways. As they have control over the business (no outside funding obligations), they can manipulate it to suit their lifestyle and beliefs. They control the business, it does not control them. This is a philosophy that the business also encourages within the staff. They are given the opportunity to tailor their working life around their lifestyle outside work.

To enable effective operation of their business philosophy, the Chewyngs have designed an extraordinary business system which enables workers to undertake assignments at their own levels of intensity.

- **Positive work environment**

Having a suitable work environment is essential to the business being successful. Staff are provided with training and support and given overall responsibility for their portfolio of clients. The building of self-esteem in staff is integral to the business philosophy. Also the physical work environment is comfortable, clean and safe.

- **Independence**

Not having any outside funding for the business since its conception has allowed Robert and Melinda to develop the systems and ideas according to what they perceived to be right.

SUCCESS FACTORS

- Determination
- Business design and control
- Positive work environment
- Independence
- Quality service and promotion
- Outside Advice
- Staff input

- **Quality service and promotion**

Lawn mowing and gardening work is the ‘bread and butter’ of the business. This service is promoted as a quality service and at no time have the Chewyings used the fact that they do not employ mainstream people to sell the service to the public. Although there would be a certain ‘sympathy vote’, they feel that advertising the staff’s special needs to gain work would be counter to the integrity of the business philosophy.

The standard of the business’s work is certainly above industry standards. To confirm their quality, Robert and Melinda employ the services of a qualified horticulturist to review each job, and provide recommendations for improvement. Every customer receives the report. If some task is not done well enough it is immediately remedied.

- **Outside Advice**

The Chewyings have sought out mentors and advisors when the business had reached certain impasses and they were unable to go any further in a particular area on their own. They recognise that they cannot possibly be an expert in all areas of business (staff, finance, marketing, social, cultural, training, recruitment etc.) and so found it essential to seek outside advice on issues we have not been sure of. Finding the right person for the advice has not always been easy! The friendship and mentor support of Peter Botsman has been invaluable.

- **Staff Input**

The input of employees has been an essential element of business success. They are involved in every aspect of the work they do. They are given more responsibilities as they gain more skills, and they control the amount of work they do. Employees are the basis of the business, and their confidence and loyalty are what has made the business strong and successful.

Peter Botsman summarises well the Chewying's philosophy regarding staff –

'Each person has their own genius. You just have to create the environment for it to flourish. The business system creates an umbrella of support and infrastructure. At the start of every week, employees are issued with a portfolio that breaks down each job into achievable tasks, and each week the employees get better and better at their tasks. As this occurs, new challenges are issued. The outcome for some will be their own lawn and horticulture franchise, finding and running their own jobs and employees. For others, there are TAFE and horticulture qualifications to gain and the challenge of mastering new machinery and gardens. Every employee can find their niche.' (ibid, p12)

Advice to other Indigenous people contemplating the enterprise option

Robert loves to quote Rolf Harris –

- *'Find your obsession, make it your profession, and you'll never do another day's work!'*

In addition, Robert has some simple, but powerful personal philosophies –

- *'Determination in doing what you really want to do is the most important factor.'*
- *'Business is not only about money, it's also about finding yourself.'*
- *'Don't let money rule your thoughts. Once you find what you want, work on it until you get it and don't give up.'*

For Further Information

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