

FEATURE

Widening the creative mix

Ci is the new line on sparking innovative leadership, writes **Sam Quinlan**.

Tania De Jong promises to revolutionise the way corporations, policy-makers and individuals approach innovation through creative engagement across sectors. Her experience as the head of multiple businesses and charities, along with her creative acclaim as a renowned operatic soprano and lead in a group of her own creation, Pot-Pourri, reveal her entrepreneurial skill and deep engagement with creative pursuits.

A self-styled "creativity and innovation catalyst", De Jong has plenty of experience in the corporate sector working with top teams in disparate industries, helping them build capabilities in creativity and innovation.

She says this work seeks to sculpt a new breed of creative leadership that is equipped to deal with the wicked problems of the modern world.

Her Creative Innovations (or Ci) conference is an extension of this work, bringing together global leaders in industry, academia and futurism in an environment that seeks to engage audience and speaker in inventive ways.

Running from November 27 to 29, this year's fourth annual conference is at the Sofitel on Collins in Melbourne – attracting more than 40 presenters, speakers and performers from around the globe – making it the largest gathering of international speakers at any conference in the country.

"I'd always known about the Ted talks and things, but I wanted to create a conference that was like no other conference globally," De Jong says.

"I wanted to create a conference that was across sectors... you know, we all go to our medical or accounting or industry-specific conference, I wanted to create a conference that broke down silos and create what I call positive human collisions, to bring together global innovators and leaders from across all sectors."

More than just bringing together participants from unrelated



Ci lady: Tania De Jong, soprano, social entrepreneur, business woman and motivational speaker. Photo: Sam Quinlan

professions, her methodology hopes to engage them in unique and creative ways.

"The idea was really to connect with people not just on the left side of their brain, which is how most conferences work; you go you hear a lot of speaking, usually a lot of power points... often there's not a lot of chances to interact," De Jong says.

"Our conference is very interactive, we use a lot of technology and hotspot conversations and ways to break down barriers between speakers and audience, reinforcing the idea of people having positive human collisions."

This creative bent to the corporate conference dynamic has proven hugely successful, with past participants heaping effusive praise on this artistic, creative method.

Scott Anthony, Singapore-based author and managing partner of US consulting firm Innosight says the conference offers something dynamic.

"The thing that struck me was the

value of the collisions between academics, thought leaders, advisers, artists, entrepreneurs, business people and government officials," he says.

"The unusually eclectic mix led to some fascinating discussions and deep insights."

"It was an unusual conference, in a very positive way."

This is what De Jong means by breaking down silos between corporate, academic and government sectors – creating a space conducive to collaboration in solving problems and learning transferable skills about innovation from other sectors.

For your average corporate or government employee, this approach promises to activate a sense of entrepreneurship, or an ability to engage, invent and act from within existing power structures.

De Jong's focus on diversity in tackling the problems of modern industry and society seems to stem from her extensive charity work.

She has headed two successful charities focused on creativity and artistic expression. The Song Room and Creativity Australia run programs of social inclusion and artistic participation through school music and arts programs and choir groups.

The Song Room earned her a Membership of the Order of Australia.

This pioneering creative and socially aware philosophy has underpinned her corporate guidance and inspirational speaking. It also undoubtedly informed the planning and executing of Ci conferences.

The large number of volunteers involved in Ci and the 10 scholarships offered to emerging innovation leaders reflect this overarching sense of inclusion and diversity.

De Jong's focus on creative education has broader aims and implications.

"If we're not educating our young people to think creatively, we're not educating them for the future," she says.

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

pH meter

Name: John Schofield.

Job: Quality assurance manager.

Where: Jalna.

Why is it important?

We make a natural yoghurt that's free from additives, so the quality of the finished product relies heavily on effective fermentation and lactic acid production. We have to measure the pH levels in every batch that we do. If a product usually sets in about seven hours, I'll check the pH after about six hours, because if it's too acidic, it can spoil the flavour.

I use one of two pH meters to do the monitoring. I take the handheld one into the incubators to check while we're fermenting, but there's a benchtop version too.

There's a simple calibration we do on the meter every day, so we are confident in the readings we are getting.

What do your colleagues think?

We taste as a team: the owner, sales guys and everyone in the office does it, so we get everyone's opinion and use the time to taste the previous day's product. It's a ritual that happens at 10.30am every day. I've been here 11 years, but that ritual has been going for much longer than that. You'll soon know if the pH meter is working properly.

Unusual moment?

It's always good to have a few laughs in the workplace. On more than one occasion, I have set up the panel of tasters, particularly when trialling a new product, by putting two of the same batch out in different containers and watching people intensely discussing the difference in flavour, texture and body, before eventually letting them in on the fact that they are exactly the same product. It keeps them on their toes.

How much does it cost?

A pH meter costs about \$500 to \$1000. It's important to buy a good one.

SUE WHITE



John Schofield with his pH meter.

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