

Narrikup, Western Australia

**FLETCHER INTERNATIONAL
EXPORTS PTY LTD,
ALBANY ABATTOIR**



Melissa Fletcher-Toovey was always destined to have a large role in her family's meat exporting business, *Fletcher International Exports Pty Ltd*. Showing determination and passion to learn from an early age, it seemed inevitable. As a young girl Melissa wanted to be the boss or be an actor. Melissa could not act, but she had passion, determination and a capacity to succeed in business, and that was her fate. As Manager, Melissa has brought out the best in her 470 employees and propelled the Narrikup operation in Western Australia to a level beyond which even her nationally known entrepreneur father, Roger could have hoped for.

The Story So Far...

As a young girl, Melissa took any opportunity to learn the *'ins and outs'* of every aspect of the family Dubbo based meat business. She undertook work experience in most roles within the company. She can remember telling her father Roger that she wanted to be a movie star when she grew up, but added – *'If I can't do that, I want your job and be the boss.'* (Rees and Fischer 2003, p44)

A defining time in her life was in 1992, when she experienced life in Alabama, USA, as an exchange student. As an Aboriginal person in an all white school, she encountered blatant racism. That time helped develop an attitude totally opposed to generalising and stereotyping people, but treating them as you find them. This has shaped her approach to life and business management ever since.

Returning to Australia, she deferred university, and opted to work with her father and undertake a Diploma of Meat Management in Melbourne – as the youngest person and

Building The Future Through Enterprise – Stories of Successful Enterprises and Entrepreneurs

first female person to apply, she initially experienced difficulty in being accepted into the course, but ended up coming second in the class.

In mid 1990, the Western Australian Government approached *Fletchers International* to open an operation in Western Australia. The decision was a risky one - the Government had offered some subsidies, but the risk and financial commitment was huge, the enterprise could not afford to fail. In 1998 the multi-million dollar Narrikup factory, just north of Albany, was built and business began. At age 22, Melissa left her family in Dubbo

and moved to Western Australia to run the administration. However she had higher aspirations - she wanted to be the boss!



Melissa Fletcher-Toovey with her children

As fate would have it, Melissa got her wish when the outside manager her father had hired to run the company quit within the first few weeks of operation. Melissa stepped up to become the leader – she did not tell her father - Melissa wanted to prove her talent. When her father arrived six weeks later, he was shocked to see Melissa at the helm and the extent to which production was up and running. The business had taken off - largely due to Melissa's management capacity and crew of eager dedicated staff. Melissa

recounts, *'Dad tells me that when he came to WA and realised it was me establishing the*

business, he was impressed. It was one of the proudest moments of my life. Dad is a believer in change and the capacity of youth, but I still stunned him! He realised his determination and business skills had rubbed off on me – he said he would never doubt me again!'

The business faces constant challenges. They were severely affected by the drought of 2000 – production in early 2001 decreased dramatically as stock numbers reduced. Night shift was subsequently ended, a move that resulted in loss of employment for 160 of her 470 workers. The decision to cut jobs was one of the hardest decisions of Melissa's management career. The business took two and a half years to recover from the effects of the drought, a factor that no one could predict and certainly no one could control.

The Narrikup factory is run independently and very differently from the Dubbo base – and competition between father and daughter is rife! Melissa has managed the Narrikup base in her own style.

The Impact

Fletchers International Exports Pty Ltd in Western Australia currently employs 470 people and there is a major employer within the Great Southern Region of Western Australia. The company contribution to the rural town of Narrikup and its surrounding areas is huge. The entire town feels the pinch when capacity slows down annually in July.



Arial view of Narrikup factory

Melissa is strongly committed to the employment of Indigenous people and 30 are currently employed in her company. Nothing makes her prouder than to see Indigenous people being successful in the industry. Melissa understands the issues Indigenous people face within the community. She has been taken aback by

people's blatant lack of tact and respect when they make racist comments directly in front of her – of course they never mean it about her! She has had to hold back her feelings in these situations. She is immensely proud of her culture and knows her Aboriginality is

special. Slowly but surely the attitudes of the Non-Indigenous community are changing, as too are the lives and the opportunities of the people she employs.

Success Factors

Melissa identifies six main factors critical to her success as a business manager.

Workforce Attitudes and Practices

Melissa is able to identify the talent and ability of her staff. She knows they are the business's greatest asset and the key to its success. Influenced by her own Aboriginality and the incorrect assumptions people have made about her, Melissa sees people for their worth. Some people would think twice about hiring someone in a wheelchair to run an abattoir – not Melissa. Assistant Manger Greg Cross happens to be in one – he often jokes, *'For a veggie and a girl we don't do a bad job!'*

Melissa focuses on the skills of the people she works with. Against industry and award recommendations, the entire plant's staff, in all divisions, are multi – skilled. She was told this could not be done – words that seem to ignite a fire of determination within Melissa.

One of the successes of the business lies with Melissa and her philosophy on how people should be treated and what sort of environment they should

work in. Melissa believes people are one of the company's two major resources - the other is the livestock! Melissa is passionate about building teamwork. Her attitude towards her staff and abolition hierarchy are unusual within the male dominated world of meat and meat production. Productivity levels, staff retention and the respect she has gained within the industry have vindicated her management approach.

SUCCESS FACTORS

- Workforce Attitudes & Practices
- Continuous Improvement
- Openness to Change
- Leading by Example
- Reliability
- Effective Communication

Continuous Improvement

Melissa believes in the adage – *'As soon as you stand still, you might as well die.'* Melissa is constantly challenging her own knowledge and embracing opportunities to increase the capacity of the business. She also lives by the philosophy that *'the harder you work, the luckier you get.'*

Melissa continually tries new processes, striving not only for ways to increase business efficiency, but also to improve safety and the well-being of her employees. Melissa believes key advice she learnt from her father was being *'... willing to take a chance, always look to improve and don't accept that if a thing is going well, it's right. You've always got to get that one step better. That's something we've absolutely instilled in the culture of our industry.'* (ibid, 2000, p47)

Openness to Change

Being willing to change with the times and embrace other people's suggestions and input has been a key success factor for Melissa. Melissa is always open to new ways to improve the business and finds that the best improvements often come from the staff themselves.

Leading by Example

Melissa is never afraid to get her hands dirty. Although she is the Manager, she can be found assisting in the production area. Melissa does not believe in having a pecking order, everyone is equal. Melissa's tolerance and openness has created a culture within the organisation where everyone feels comfortable and accepted.

Reliability

This particularly relates to the payment of the people who supply the business. By having a reputation of paying accounts regularly one becomes a valuable customer to them. This means people will offer you that extra service - they will feel you are dependable.

Effective Communication

Communicating effectively with employees, customers and suppliers is essential in Melissa's business. It is important to Melissa to let employees understand the changes and differing directions happening within the business. Keeping communication lines open means nothing is held back – the staff feels that they are able to contribute and their opinions are encouraged and valued.

Advice to other Indigenous people contemplating the enterprise option

Melissa has this advice -

'There is always going to be bad times. Persevere. There will be good times as well. Remember that time changes things. Business is hard in the beginning, but things improve as your knowledge increases and your capacity is strengthened.'

For Further Information

Melissa Fletcher
General Manager
Fletchers International Exports Pty Ltd
Postal: PO Box 680
Albany, WA 6331
Phone: (08) 9892 4000
Fax: (08) 9892 4080

Email m.fletcher@fletcher-international.com.au