



Kaye Colmer

Chief Executive Officer, Gowrie South Australia, Adelaide (SA)



Gowrie SA opened in 1940, part of a Commonwealth Government initiative to establish a model of integrated early childhood education, health and parent services, including demonstration and research functions. The range of services currently provided at Gowrie SA includes preschool and childcare programs, professional development, training and advice services, resources, consultancy and parenting programs. This means we have a diverse client group that includes parents of children attending the Gowrie, those accessing the Gowrie training and resource programs, other children's services and centres, professional associations, peak bodies, nongovernment organisations and government departments.

My role within the organisation is Chief Executive Officer (CEO) with responsibilities of overview of all programs, working to implement the strategic plan, developing new programs and reporting directly to the board. While I take my management responsibilities seriously my real passion is developing leadership within the team and creating opportunities for innovative work, driving improvement of our programs, professional learning and developing new programs and resources. For me, there is a complex overlap of operational, management and leadership functions; meaning that I work directly on some operational tasks while having responsibility for operation of the whole organisation.

Over the past decade I have worked towards creating a distributed leadership model, flattening the hierarchy to strengthen leadership opportunities for children's program staff and training staff. Leadership opportunities are not restricted to staff in formal leadership positions but are extended to staff throughout the organisation. In 2010, work was undertaken to develop an organisational chart that would reflect both the leadership possibilities but also expectations and responsibilities of Gowrie staff and the board. The aim was to graphically represent to staff points of departure from the confines of a traditional hierarchical structure. Most of all we want all within our organisation to appreciate the bigger picture context of our organisation.

The Gowrie SA Board is responsible for governance of the organisation. We have been very fortunate that our organisation was established with one governance body, initially a management committee but in recent years the organisation's Constitution was altered to enable a board structure. The value of a board means that the board is able to strategically recruit members for their knowledge and expertise rather than accepting representatives nominated by various groups. The Constitution also allows for up to two parent representatives to facilitate the perspective of a significant client group. The Constitution provides for a board structure of up to eight members including the CEO who has voting rights. Meetings are held every six weeks with an agreed structure that enables discussion of important decisions within an allocated meeting time of two hours. The board elects the Chairperson and Treasurer and can also form working groups to undertake specific tasks.

We have clear delineations between operational and governance matters. The operational matters include management and day-to-day control of functions, leadership and management of staff and maintenance of financial systems and budgets. Governance on the other hand involves steering the organisation and the board is focused on policy, analysis, opportunities, and strategic direction, including thinking about how current decisions might impact on future possibilities. The board also makes strategic decisions including what actions and resources are needed to achieve organisational goals. Both the Chair and Treasurer provide important analytical roles but all board members are expected to be active participants in dialogue and decision-making. As the CEO, it is my responsibility to provide the board with

information needed for them to fulfil their functions.

The separation of governance and operational matters is often the most difficult balance to achieve. On the one hand, board members, especially the Chair, provide valuable support to me in my role but I have to be disciplined in not inviting engagement in operational matters which are my responsibility. It is very clearly defined in my job description that my role is the operation of the service and my key performance requirement is to work towards achieving organisational goals. At times when separation between operational and governance matters is not clear, roles can become blurred, leading to confusion and difficulties. If we can ensure that our voluntary board members are passionate about the history and future of our organisation, and focused on steering our organisation through uncertain and changing political landscapes, we expect our organisation to continue to evolve and grow.