



Transcript: Episode 3 – Governance and keeping an open door with Jay Bartlett

Jasmin Bauomy (host): How do people and businesses maneuver the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Pacific region and how can good governance make them more resilient? These are the questions we're trying to answer in this episode of Future Keepers.

JB: Hello, and welcome to Future Keepers. I'm your host, Jasmin Bauomy and on this mini-series, organizational leaders from across the Pacific region tell us what they learned from the past challenges and what they need to remain resilient now and in the future.

In this episode, we are hearing from Jay Bartlett, from the Solomon Islands. And up until recently, Jay was the chair of the Solomon Islands Chamber of Commerce and Industry. And because that's such a mouthful, it's also called SICCI. All in all he spent around 10 years on the SICCI board.

Jay Bartlett (Managing Director of Hatanga Ltd): Funnily enough, I did a Marine biology degree. So I didn't have any formal business training and really was planning to be working out in rural communities mainly in conservation and, and that sort of thing. But came back and started working in the founder business, which is Hatanga in construction. Really sort of learning as I go. And so I developed kind of this thinking that, I had to keep an open mind and learn as much as I could because I didn't have any formal education.

JB: When Jay first joined SICCI the organization was going through a tough time, financially and in terms of its leadership. And so fixing those issues through good governance was one of Jay's priorities.

Jay Bartlett: it's a long process, to improve and strengthen the governance of any organization. We did constitutional reforms that would clear ambiguities in, in the constitution. That took some time to work through constitutional reform. That's on a, on a high level. So we modernized the constitution.

Long term, we wanted to improve governance in the private sector and so, we looked at hosting governance programs. We managed to partner up with the Institute of Directors New Zealand and we held directorship programs. So fundamentals for directors, which walks through governance, finance, risk, and we all did the training and that helped the board get a broader understanding of how we could improve governance on a board level. Things that might seem unimportant, but the minute taking, we really sort of honed in and focused on making sure that we really had those down to a level that where

any organization in the Solomon Islands could come and look at SICCI and say, hey look, this is a good standard to aspire to as an organization that represented business, we wanted to set the gold standard.

It was things like, some of the lesser virtues, like being punctual to board meetings, coming prepared to, to board meetings. I set our board meeting times to two hours and we were really focused on even conducting ourselves in the meetings, to just maintain that professionalism and governance level that we wanted to aspire to.

So, so those are some of the things that we did and really I knew we had to develop trust within our stakeholders, which were our members because they're investing their funds, their personal funds into us as an organization.

JB: And Jay's efforts to improve governance inside SICCI paid off in other ways as well.

Jay Bartlett: We were able to grow our membership. We were more visible as an organization. We developed strong partnerships with our stakeholders, the Institute of Directors New Zealand. We developed an MOU with the government, and this was one of our initiatives, to create some sort of structure around the way that government and private sector engaged.

And we, we realized that the bridge between government and business was too big and we had to bring policy makers, business leaders, political leaders closer together. And so we, we developed this MOU, which was a platform for that engagement where was signed by the government. And one of the first MOUs was that was signed by a chamber in the Pacific. I think maybe Samoa might have an MOU but we developed really close working relationship with our stakeholders, with the government.

Having strong governance in the background, I knew as a board that we could step out of our comfort zone and not have to worry about our backend, our administration and we had strong systems in place.

And so our focus could really shift externally and shift to the advocacy work that we wanted to do as an organization. And so I think, especially I know for the board and the CEO, having strong governance enabled us to, to move out and move out with confidence.

JB: In his own construction and logistics business, Jay has also implemented certain practices and values, which he found are integral to the company's culture.

Jay Bartlett: You know, we're, we're a fairly small organization in the grand scheme of things.

And so we are a very sort of tight knit team and I guess as a family business, you do have those family values that you have at home really carry through. And in our type of society, our communities are very close knit. We tend to, we tend to help each other.

And so, I've got an open door policy in my organization. So I've got, while I do have someone managing HR, my door's always open for anyone that wants to come in and, and have a chat if any kind of concerns or any thinking that they want to share. And it happens. It happens a lot and I'm happy to be able to connect and to hear what the concerns are and get a good understanding of what people go through and stay connected to sometimes the realities that people face. And I think that's a good way

that the employees know that they can also be heard and if they have concerns, there is an avenue, while there is a formal avenue, they're most welcome to talk to the leadership.

JB: Just like elsewhere in the world, businesses in the Solomon Islands have been hit hard by the global pandemic.

Jay Bartlett: The public health measures the government has, has taken to protect us from COVID certainly has, really had a negative impact on the economy, overnight closing travel, has been dropped off a cliff edge in terms of economic activity.

There's a lot of fear. There's a lot of anxiety and there's a lot of unpredictability about what's going to happen and that's never good for business.

Business like predictability. Business like to have confidence. And so there's been a really negative impact for the Solomon Islands economy.

It's impacted different sectors differently, obviously. And I think Solomon Islands broadly compared to a lot of other Pacific island nations, we're, I think in a better position, we've had low debt to GDP. One of the lowest debt to GDP ratios in the Pacific for sure.

And we've had a big pipeline of infrastructure programs that was ready to roll out. So that has been, I guess, the light at the end of the tunnel for us as a country.

So that's been really good. So, tourism, service industry they've really been impacted, I guess, like other economies. But broadly I think Solomon Islands has been on a, on a pretty good foothold so far. And we've been able to keep COVID out. We've had COVID in quarantine, but our government has done a really, really good job in keeping COVID out of our community.

JB: And in his own business, Jay had to think creatively about how to ensure it and its workers survive the pandemic.

Jay Bartlett: Operating in a, in an environment where all the risks are elevated. It does create a sense of tension. And so it really especially comes through in the workplace when, when you come across challenges.

So one of the key areas I know I have had to focus on and then build on kind of this culture that we have of this team work that we have really putting extra focus on that. We have good mechanisms to address grievances and ensure that, we, we have a good understanding of the environment and challenges people have, being flexible in terms of enable people to work from home, enable people to have time off, the open door policy that I mentioned, having that that engagement. One of the things that I've started to do is, have small social things and celebratory kind of events with our different teams and different jobs. So that's something that we've rolled out recently. Celebrate milestones and try and just maintain this positive kind of attitude and outlook overall and letting that filter down through the different levels of the organization and with our staff. There's certainly a lot of uncertainty just in general with construction, there's a lot of uncertainty just because of the nature of the work is very cyclic.

And so, we're very transparent about the work that we are bidding on. We communicate that message across our teams. We've, we've put in a tender for another job. We were unsuccessful in this job. So everyone's very well aware of, the moves that we are doing.

We're scaling down teams as we do naturally but we always look forward and give assurance that when work comes up, we're going to rebuild the team and get you guys back on. So yeah, I guess, communicating well.

And honestly, with, with our management and our teams.

JB: Global data shows that the economic fallout of the pandemic has had a stronger impact on women than on men. But that data isn't always easy to come by as Jay knows.

Jay Bartlett: We haven't got data that demonstrates that there's any significant difference, but we do know that in sectors like the hospitality sector, they do, are made up of predominantly female workers. And so, it's probably a safe assumption to say that, there is a bigger impact on woman.

JB: Jay says that since the construction industry, that his company is part of, is very male dominated. He's been making an effort to attract women talent.

Jay Bartlett: We did the Waka Mere program with IFC. We've done training for females in roles that are normally done by males, like forklift driving. And so we've now seen an uptake in forklift drivers for the for females with the construction.

Through the Waka Were program as well, we identified a lot of gaps in our policy, that really, wasn't creating a workplace that would have been supportive to women. So through that program, we've developed a lot of policy now that, has enabled us to, to try and attract and recruit females.

Generally I think just perception, people still see construction as a man's job. But we've now got the back-end policy that will help sort of drive this recruitment.

JB: One of the policies that they updated was centering on domestic violence. And in fact, the Solomon Islands has among the highest rates of domestic and sexual violence in the world.

A survey by IFC and SICCI showed that one in three employees experienced domestic or sexual violence in the past 12 months. One in three. And in a year, an employee could lose more than two working weeks because of the impact of domestic and sexual violence. And just like elsewhere, the pandemic has made things worse.

Jay Bartlett: So, we, we didn't have any domestic violence policy. And so actually we did have an incident while the Waka Mere program was happening. And while we were going through this training, we had, a domestic violence incident with one of our female plumbers at the time.

And so, you know, really highlighted the gaps that we had. And so we developed this policy that helped us manage these type of incidents. So provide support and direction and the mechanism that enabled us to do to help this particular worker through and so domestic violence policies, some other grievance policies that were lacking has now been better established.

We direct them to Seif Ples, which is an organization that's there for victims of domestic violence to help them get the support that they need. We also are flexible with giving time off, paid leave, unpaid leave if they need it. But, but the big one is really directing them and, and having the contacts that they need during these sort of situations.

JB: Looking ahead, Jay says that people and businesses in the Solomon Islands are used to dealing with environmental crisis and social challenges, which makes them naturally resilient.

Jay Bartlett: We've certainly gone through our own sets of challenges as, as an organization. But we always maintain a positive outlook. We always carry that sort of resilient spirit with us. And I certainly know for us that coming through COVID especially, which is something that is so unique and something that is so unexpected.

And as something that certainly has changed the way that we work in the way that we look at work and the way that we look at our economies and the way that we plan ahead. I certainly know that it's helped us to be better and to work harder to think smarter, to be more innovative about how we address some of these challenges.

It really forces you to make hard decisions that I think under normal circumstances you would defer or not address so I think it, it forces us to be more resilient, to think more resilient, to think more positive.

JB: But Jay says, future crises could test people's resilience. And so he'd like to see the island nation's economy become more sustainable so that crises can be viewed as an opportunity.

Jay Bartlett: Our economy needs to be structured in a way that is more sustainable, focusing on agriculture and focusing on some of these things that will build resilience naturally in our economy and in our community. And so while it is challenging and there is a lot of pain, there's certainly light at the end of the tunnel. And you know through every crisis is an opportunity and we look at this as an opportunity to develop that resilience even more and hopefully come through it at the end of the day in a better position.

JB: And that was it for this episode of Future Keepers. Many, thanks to Jay Bartlett for taking the time to talk. This podcast mini-series is a production of the International Finance Corporation, a member of the World Bank Group. IFC's work in the Pacific is supported by the governments of Australia and New Zealand.

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