

Yaanma: How a fully Indigenous owned facilities service company was built



There's a famous Australian song written by music legends Kev Carmody and Paul Kelly called, From little things big things grow.

It tells the story of Vincent Lingari and the Gurindji people's struggle for landrights and equality in the 1960s.

Today that iconic song has become an anthem for reconciliation. But more than that, it's a testament to how true grit, empathy and patience can lead to great outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

The story of how Yaanma, a 100% Indigenous owned facilities service company, was built is a fitting example of

the legacy of Kev and Paul's song. It's the story of how one small idea and a whole lot of hard work, care and respect grew into a company with a vision to nurture and grow Indigenous leaders in the facility services industry.

Yaanma Director Shane Jacobs is incredibly proud of the precedent that Facilities First has modelled by first building Yaanma and then transferring the company to 100% Indigenous ownership.

"I think Facilities First should be commended for this," says Shane. "They wanted to do it right. Very rarely do you hear of businesses going from majority non-Indigenous owned to 100% Indigenous owned; it's always the other way. They showed real leadership, they passed something on that was not just about money; it was about a social outcome."

The Yaanma vision



Yaanma started as a vision within the Facilities First team, spearheaded by Melissa Brennan, a proud Aboriginal woman, as Facilities First CEO Ben Bayot explains.

“The idea was to create an Indigenous company where we could provide opportunities for Indigenous people to be employed and then further to that. The idea was to hand our ownership over to an Indigenous company,” says Ben.

“It grew organically from talking to Melissa. It wasn’t a model that we copied anywhere and it certainly wasn’t profitable for Facilities First from a financial point of view, but for social procurement and personal satisfaction it ticked all the boxes.”

Yaanma is a Dharawal word meaning ‘to go/walk together’. The language is said to be spoken by the Indigenous people who had a relationship with the area south of Botany Bay and the Georges River, west to Appin, down as far as Goulburn and Wreck Bay near Nowra. The Yaanma logo is a traditional symbol for people sitting, a perfect representation of the gathering of all people involved in the company’s journey.

First steps



The early set-up days for Yaanma were difficult, but the deep satisfaction of seeing how providing job opportunities for young Indigenous people had such a positive effect on both them and their families made it more than worthwhile.

"It was very tough early on in the piece," says Ben, "when we went to places like Alice Springs and Boulder territory to find Indigenous workers and experiencing the difficulties that these Indigenous people have."

Ben has a story about employing one young Indigenous man that has become a particular point of pride for the entire Facilities First team.

"One of the first young Indigenous men we employed didn't have any shoes. Melissa took this chap to the local store and bought him a pair of shoes and he began cleaning with us, and to this day he's a supervisor on one of those sites there. So just the stories like that were enough to get some satisfaction, the knowledge that we had made a difference to one person's life."

Introducing Orana Services



Once Yaanma was established and beginning to grow, the Facilities First were keen to move onto the next phase of their vision: partnering with an Indigenous company that could take full ownership of Yaanma.

So they turned to a company they knew and trusted, Orana Services, a majority owned and operated Australian Indigenous Company, founded by lifelong friends Mark Fisher and Shane Jacobs.

Orana Services were a good fit as they were already doing maintenance work with Facilities First across the education facility management portfolio with a focus on primary schools in Sydney.

But the motivation to transition Yaanma to 100% Indigenous ownership was not just about the feelgood factor. Facilities First knew Indigenous ownership was

essential for Yaanma to achieve its goal to close the gap and pave the way for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to seek leadership and develop careers as key decision makers. The cultural differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous workers was a big bridge to cross. While the senior team at Facilities First could see the vision, it wasn't so easy for their teams out in the field.

"We wanted the focus of Yaanma to be employing more Indigenous kids and nurturing them through, but there was a problem for us at Facilities First. We were struggling to understand the day-to-day issues that Indigenous people have to help them survive in their jobs," explains Ben.

It's a problem that Shane Jacobs understands all too well.

Understanding culture



For Shane, companies that are 100% Indigenous owned are vital to solving the gap, a solution that aims to reduce disadvantage and increase living standards among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

"I've been advocating this strategy for a long time now and senior executives get it, but the hard part is pushing it through the DNA of your business."

It comes down to understanding culture. At this moment in time the cultural divide in Australia is, at times, still so wide that important conversations can be too difficult to have. Indigenous Business Australia has released a statistic showing that an Aboriginal business is a hundred times more likely to employ an Aboriginal person. As Shane explains,

"It's a lot easier for an Aboriginal business to employ an Aboriginal person, because the conversations I can have with an Aboriginal person are very different to a non-Aboriginal person."

The conversations Shane is talking about can be culturally sensitive, like if an Indigenous worker says they are going to a funeral it means a week off work and a trip home, whereas for many non-Indigenous workers it would be just an afternoon off work.

Or it may be issues stemming from financial hardship, just like the Yaanma worker not having enough money to buy shoes.

For Shane, the point is that as an Aboriginal person he can understand and anticipate these issues and run his business to accommodate them. The end result is Indigenous companies like Yaanma and Orana Services supporting Indigenous people in the workplace.

As Shane says, "There's still a lot of work to be done and I don't believe we're closing but I do believe we're solving the gap. But if I can say this: don't you guys try and do it, let us Aboriginal people do it, give us the opportunities to do it."

For the team at Facilities First, there's a lot of pride to be had in being part of that solution. As Ben explains:

"One of the main reasons Facilities First passed ownership of Yaanma on to Shane and his team was because we knew they could do far better with it than what we could."



Two-way exchange



For the team at Facilities First, the benefits of establishing Yaanma and transferring ownership to Shane, Melissa and the other Indigenous partners was a cultural exchange that has lasting benefits both personally and professionally.

An enduring memory for all was the Welcome Ceremony organised by Shane and Orana Services after the completion of the rebuild of Seaforth Primary School after a fire that left their classroom block destroyed.

The event included a traditional smoking ceremony, performances by traditional warriors from Aboriginal Dance Corporation followed by a didgeridoo performance from one of Australia's most celebrated keynote speakers, artists and performers, Kuku-Yalanji descendent Jeremy Donovan. The unveiling of the new classrooms also featured a mural painted by an Indigenous artist, and including the handprints of the school children.

For Ben, the work Orana Services and Facilities First provided at Seaforth was about more than building classrooms – it was about giving back to the community.

"Look at how many children's lives we touched with the mural and the ceremony," says Ben. "When I went to school, you didn't talk about Indigenous people, let alone have a smoking ceremony onsite and a mural of the people who own this land. So, not only are we creating jobs, we're a part of actually educating the next generation, and that's the most moving bit for me."



Going 100%



Today, Yaanma is a successful company delivering high quality facility services, but the path wasn't all smooth sailing.

As Facilities First CEO, the biggest hurdle for Ben was getting to 100% Indigenous shareholding.

"For me, working with Orana and Shane was the easy bit. Continually convincing the board that this was about more than a financial outcome for the four years while we established Yaanma was the biggest challenge. And I think that's why Yaanma is so unique, because businesses aren't willing to go through that pain and put a price on what are social responsibilities."

Comes back to care



There is a raft of reasons that the team at Facilities First are proud of the lasting partnership they forged with Shane and his team to build Yaanma into the company it is today. Every single reason comes back to care, and that's where the heart of the matter really lies for Facilities First. Building Yaanma enabled the team to live the values, that as a company, they hold so dear.

It's why they can say with full confidence that at Facilities First care is at the heart of everything they do.

Shane Jacobs, Director of Yaanma and Managing Director of Orana Services, sums it up best:

"At the end of the day, you have to look after your first nations people to move forward as a country. Facilities First gets that. They understand they're taking care of buildings that are on our land. They've got a real empathy for that. You've got to have empathy and understanding for people no matter what colour or creed you are."

We'd like to thank Shane for his time and wish him and the team at Yaanma all the best in growing the little company we started into the big vision we all share.



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