

Call on me

by Renee Carl

Danielle Robertson had big shoes to fill when she stepped into the role of CEO at Dial An Angel. Having worked in the business for 17 years prior, it was a natural progression for Robertson. The company was founded in 1967 by Robertson's mother, Dena Blackman, and is still going strong more than four decades later. The transition of leadership couldn't have been smoother, thanks to the open communication shared between the two.

Dial an Angel evolved when Blackman realised there was a gap in the market for quality home care services.

"I had a wait list of 22 clients before I interviewed my first angel, and that's when I knew it was really going to be a desperately needed [area]," says Blackman, who continues to oversee the day to day running of the business.

"I thought it was going to be a hobby, I had a six week old baby!"

The philosophy that steered the business on its growth path many years ago is still very much part of its ethos today – providing quality service and retaining a personal touch with both staff and clients. Live-in as well as visiting 'angels' are able to provide all home-based services including domestic housekeeping, child care, in-home nursing, eldercare, garden and home maintenance, pet care and assistance with home and corporate functions.

The ties that bind

What was initially thought of as a casual business venture has since expanded to 11 offices nationwide.

Dial an Angel is very much a female oriented business that remains engaged with its staff. Robertson believes there is a very clear difference between the leadership style of men and women.

"Women are more personal. I've got a very open door policy, our people come and talk to me about issues whether it be work related or personal issues – I don't get too involved – but I can certainly guide them and give them help along the way. I think if you went to a male boss, and said I'm having problems at home, he might say 'well sit and deal with it'."

And while there is a common perception that female business owners are more in touch with the emotions of the workplace than their male counterparts, Robertson believes it's possible to have an active involvement in the concerns of staff, without letting emotions get in the way of effective leadership.

“I keep it very separate – I’m fair and reasonable and I don’t feel like I’m being taken advantage of. You can gain quite a lot out of your team members simply by listening.”

Danielle highlights the fact that succession planning is vital for family-run businesses. “We were invited on a panel for Family Business Australia talking about succession and how smooth or difficult the transition was – [for us] it was very smooth. [We have] open lines of communication and respect.”

The company has implemented a client feedback system to consistently monitor the level of service and expectations from client.

“It helps us develop areas that we might not be so strong in. Word of mouth has been the biggest way of referring our services and the feedback policy is part of that.”

And the feedback system extends not only to clients, but to staff as well. Staff surveys are conducted on issues relating to marketing, IT, people, office equipment, anything to do with the day to day running of the office. “They give me feedback and they get a response and have something actioned. I’m taking a lot on board and making changes based on their feedback.”

Robertson maintains that systems have been imperative to the company’s success. “We’ve got the systems now to cope with the sheer volume of bookings coming through to make sure we have angels in the right place at the right time.”

Leader of the pack

Robertson says the biggest challenge facing the company today is recruiting quality staff.

“We’ve never had to go out and do a huge marketing campaign, our biggest challenge is getting suitably skilled and qualified angels.”

However, Robertson prides herself on retaining the staff members who have helped build the company to what it is today.

“I’ve got long term staff members who have been with me 20 years, most of those are managers of each of our branch offices now.”

And it is this insistence on recruiting the best of the best without compromising quality that has seen Dial an Angel remain the leader in its field.

“We have our finger on the pulse. We know our clients details and their children’s birthdays – the kids love receiving a letter from Dial an Angel – it’s just that personal touch.”

And while business is booming in Australia, there are plans to eventually expand internationally. The business has registered trade marks in New Zealand, the UK, Canada and the US, in addition to local protection.

“It’s just a matter of taking on a manager who has learnt the work here and then adapt [to the region]. There are different tax and employment laws, and we have to know each area very clearly before we start opening up.”

Robertson’s biggest supporter is her mother. Blackman gives her the full seal of approval and says she admires all of her daughter’s qualities.

“I wish I had have been like her [when I was younger], I think the world is her oyster.”

And while the sky’s the limit in regard to future growth, the company has been steered successfully thanks to two very savvy and capable businesswomen at the helm.

“The feedback from the staff, and particularly from Dena, [is very rewarding] because she’s seen how the business has grown in the time that I’ve been involved – it has developed and expanded quite rapidly,” says Robertson.

And the client loyalty that has been part of Dial An Angel’s success since 1967 looks set to continue well into the future. According to Robertson:

“We still get clients ringing up saying that people who were receiving child care many years ago are receiving elder care through us. It is very rewarding and we say that we provide help from cradle to grave.”

The burgeoning home services areas has seen greater competition, which Robertson sees as a good thing to ensure they stay ahead of the field. “There are a lot of agencies coming along on our coat-tails, but we provide the total concept in family care. We always [have] the highest rates, to make sure we do get the cream of the crop for the angels – our clients are paying premiums and they expect premium service.”

It is this confidence and commitment to service that should further propel the success of Dial an Angel.

“This industry is exciting, it’s very fast paced, we’re on that treadmill and we have to keep going. I try to make sure that our planning, our vision and the company is heading in the right direction.”