

**Leading through a crisis**  
**Grant Wilckens**  
**CEO Discovery Holiday Parks**

Celebrating a strong first half of the FY20 financial year, little did I know that ahead of me lay the biggest challenge of my career. As a tourism business with an ambitious strategy for growth and a network of near 300 properties across Australia, a pandemic certainly wasn't in our annual plan.

Emerging from COVID-19, I've reflected on how the Stanford Executive Leadership Course I completed in 2014 helped me to navigate the curve ball that none of us saw coming. More than just surviving, the G'DAY Group is looking ahead at the most exciting period of growth yet.

In 2014, together with other global business leaders, I had the opportunity to become a stronger and more effective leader and drive meaningful strategic and cultural change in our business through an ILF Grant. The skills learnt during this program and via ongoing learning with ILF have been invaluable as the organisation has grown over the years, as we have developed the bench strength of our executive team and, of course, as we have faced the challenges of COVID-19.

With the pandemic hitting tourism businesses hard, we took action early. Our crisis management team shifted to a COVID-19 focus with safety, people, operations and communication working collaboratively to manage fast moving change. We have been fortunate that as our business has grown we have solidified the skills and experience in our leadership suite and built a culture of empowerment – meaning our team could take strong action fast without being hampered by unnecessary internal red tape.

As our 130-person strong head office moved to working from home and parks were closed, we reviewed how we would keep connected, engaged and collaborative as we navigated changes and restrictions. A national business headquartered in SA, we are used to communicating to a geographically disperse workforce, but COVID brought this into a harsher relief as we were forced to deliver difficult messages and employee stand downs remotely rather than in person. Leadership is not about you, it is about the people around you, and I don't mind saying it was an emotional time for me. Being available, accessible and upfront through this period was high on my priorities, as was doing all we could for our people and the future of our business.

We established weekly online catch ups and tried to focus on positives where possible to maintain a forward-facing culture. What became clear early in the pandemic was that we needed to pivot our revenue streams. This was a key takeaway from my time at Stanford, with many of the educators having consulted to cutting edge businesses in Silicon Valley and being firm advocates of keeping ahead of trends and anticipating opportunities to diversify to meet new demand.

Over the years we have proactively expanded to a 'mixed' park model, incorporating workforce parks to complement our tourism offering. Through the rise of the pandemic, we focussed our efforts on corporate clients to keep the business in motion, providing accommodation for stranded FIFO workers in northern WA, and over the last few months our workforce parks have more than performed. We also took the front foot in actively petitioning government health departments to promote our cabin accommodation as an option for self-isolation as opposed to hotels.

Our efforts were noticed, and as restrictions began to ease, particularly in South Australia, we collaborated with the Marshall government to build the story of caravan and holiday parks emerging as a holiday of choice for people looking to travel locally, in open space and fresh air, while remaining

socially distant. Our operational changes supported this, as we implemented contactless check-in and other initiatives at reopened parks to keep customers and staff safe.

As restrictions and borders have eased the green shoots for our industry are beginning to show, and we are faced with a fresh opportunity. It's been pleasing to be able to return to a voice of positivity and to showcase the resilience of our industry and, importantly, the resilience of our people. Moving forward we recognise that the culture of our business has shifted, in particular in how our people have valued greater flexibility and connectivity, and this will factor into how we work in the 'new normal'.

ILF afforded me the opportunity to invest in my professional development and there is much value in an 'always learning' mindset. Businesses need to be agile in their response to adversity and leaders need both the business acumen and people skills to weather storms operationally and culturally. While COVID-19 has been a once-in-a-career crisis the learnings are far reaching, and I could not be prouder of the huge effort from my team and the business we have built together. There are exciting times ahead.