



INTERVIEW WITH KATE LAWRENCE,  
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT COORDINATOR

## Waltja Tjutanku Palyapayi Aboriginal Corporation

Waltja Tjutanku Palyapayi Aboriginal Corporation (Waltja) is a community-based organisation, working with Aboriginal families in remote Central Australian Communities. Waltja's agenda is driven by a board of directors who are all strong Aboriginal women living in remote communities. Together they aim to improve outcomes for families spread over an area of 90,000 kms and ensure local voices are heard. Waltja won the Reconciliation Australia Indigenous Governance Award for Incorporated Organisations in 2014. Kate Lawrence, Community Engagement Coordinator, has been with the organisation for 13 years. More information about Waltja can be found at: [waltja.org.au](http://waltja.org.au).

### Can you tell me what winning the Indigenous Governance Award means to Waltja?

Winning the award has made Waltja directors and staff very proud. It's given them increased confidence in our system of governance. It's unique, but it works. One of the judges said it was a very tight contest. What made Waltja the winner was that we've developed our system of governance ourselves and it's been consistent since the very beginning of Waltja in 1997.

*"What made Waltja the [Indigenous Governance Award] winner was that we've developed our system of governance ourselves and it's been consistent since the very beginning of Waltja in 1997"*

Kate Lawrence, Community Engagement Coordinator, Waltja

*"We're very proud of winning the award"*

April Martin, Chair, Waltja

### Can you describe what Waltja's governance and management strengths are?

Waltja grew from a need and demand from remote community women leaders. It wasn't created by a government good idea or someone throwing money around. Waltja grew because remote community women had a dream of creating a resource centre for remote people when they were in Alice Springs. Waltja's governance is strong because the leaders own it.

Waltja also has an effective two-tier level of governance. The directors generally set the broad policy parameters, while the executive directors (a group of five directors elected by the board), along with the manager, make a really strong hands-on management team.

When staff travel to communities, directors look out for them. They make sure they speak to the right people and that everyone understands their job. It is a wrap-around service our directors provide and it's important to recognise that this is unpaid work. Waltja has thrived on the voluntary commitments from women leaders from remote communities.

### Were there any particular areas of governance that were identified as not working so well that needed to be strengthened?

The concerns women had were not really about the governance of Waltja, but about our inability to extend or expand good programs. There was some anxiety that smaller communities might miss out because it's hard for us to attract funding to run programs there. Some communities where there is a greater Government priority, like the so-called Growth Towns, attract more money and Waltja directors can see a real inequity growing. Waltja hopes that the Australian and NT Governments will pay attention to the communities that miss out and help with projects where elders are teaching young people to be independent and strong in culture.



ABOVE (L-R): Kate Lawrence, Mary-Therese Mulladad, April Martin, Margaret Campbell, Sharijn King

*“Good governance is really dependent on good relationships and that’s what has been really nurtured through Waltja”*

Sharijn King, CEO, Waltja

**One of the judges said: “Culture is at the core of what Waltja does. It responds to the needs of its community by being inclusive and doing things the Waltja way”. What is “the Waltja way”?**

- The Waltja way means workers listen and learn from community elders.
- It also means we only work in remote communities on invitation, with people that chose to work with Waltja. We would never run programs where we are coercing or controlling people - people choose to work with us on a voluntary basis.
- We honour language. We don’t expect people to engage with Waltja workers only in English. If Waltja workers only speak English then they work alongside a director who will help everyone understand.
- Waltja supports peaceful and constructive resolution of conflict.
- Waltja respects Aboriginal family as defined by Aboriginal people. We don’t give up on family.
- Waltja considers that remote communities should have access to services and that direct services are most effective when they are provided by local community people who have access to training and support.
- Waltja promotes self-reliance and dignity.

**How has Waltja incorporated cultural rules and values into the organisation’s governance and management structure and/or processes?**

Waltja supports self-determination. Remote communities decide who should represent them, before it gets to an election at the Waltja AGM. It is extremely important for Waltja that those people who speak for community are living in their community and are visible to the other members of the community. Waltja has invested our own funds into culture programs which support the intergenerational transmission of culture from elders to young ones.

**What benefits do you think will come from winning this award?**

It’s really good that an organisation based on traditional Aboriginal values is being recognised. It’s really significant that Waltja directors get to see themselves as leaders, not just for their area, but for Australia as a whole and that the values they operate from are really respected.

**A component of the Awards package is a 12 month partnership with a high profile corporate partner and mentor. What areas will be targeted?**

We have suggested to Life Without Barriers that they assist us with fundraising and logistical planning for aged and disability festivals. For us the things we need to grow in are not so much in governance, as winning the award would demonstrate, but how we can move away from government funding in those areas of acute need like disability, to build up our access to philanthropic funding and become better at fundraising for specific events. That is something Life Without Barriers has a greater capacity to do as they are a much larger organisation.

*“Direct services are most effective when provided by local community people who have access to training and support”*

Kate Lawrence, Community Engagement Coordinator, Waltja

**What recommendations would you give to other Aboriginal organisations to help them strengthen their governance and management?**

At our last executive meeting we spoke about what makes Waltja special and why we won the award. Some strong characteristics we discussed were working, learning, sharing and listening together, as well as respect, peace, kindness, and not being jealous. We represent communities, not just families. We make fair rules that are the same for everyone.

**Finally, do you have any advice for other organisations thinking about applying for the next governance awards?**

Ask your members what makes your organisation stand out and what makes everybody proud. And don’t be afraid, have a go!

Interviewer: Sarah Lacy, Aboriginal Governance Management Program

Waltja is working with APONT’s Aboriginal Governance and Management Program to help strengthen the governance of other Aboriginal organisations by sharing their knowledge. For more information on the Program visit [aboriginalgovernance.org.au](http://aboriginalgovernance.org.au).