



Debra Clarke

Chief Executive Officer, UTSCC Incorporated, Sydney (NSW)



UTSCC seeks to position itself as an employer of choice for high-quality early childhood staff. We are keen to attract and retain the best early childhood workforce that we can, and to this end we need to ensure that our staff are supported to do their job well. One of the ways that we do this is by providing great ratios and high numbers of qualified staff. UTSCC had already implemented many of the staffing improvements under the new national regulations well in advance of 2012, and continues to operate with staff ratios better than minimum standards in all age groups. All of our centres have operated for many years with more than 50 per cent of staff holding a Diploma or Teaching qualification and 95 per cent of all staff holding a Certificate 111 or above qualification. We employ an extra full time teacher above the NSW teacher requirements at each centre to help contribute to quality programs.

I measure the success of our human resources management strategies by looking at the following factors:

- *Attraction:* Are we recruiting the best staff? Do we get unsolicited requests for employment? Do we attract a strong field of candidates when we advertise? Do people know about UTSCC and await an employment opportunity? Do short-term contract or casual staff wish to become permanent employees?
- *Retention:* Do great staff remain with the organisation? Do staff upgrade their qualifications or seek a career path at UTSCC? Are staff supported to increase their skills through formal study or professional development opportunities?
- *Engagement:* Do staff know what is expected of them? Do they have the resources available to do their jobs? Does everyone know and understand what the organisation wants to achieve? Are people focused on being the best that they can be and providing the best care that they can?

Mutual responsibility for high-quality care, education and experiences for children exists between our organisation and staff. A workplace is not all serious, there should be a sense of fun and it's a place where staff are challenged, they take pride in what has been achieved but do not rest on their laurels. We do have high expectations of our staff, because that will assist us to create wonderful centres for children, but in exchange we provide great pay and working conditions. For too long, it has been difficult for prior to school settings to offer the same wages and conditions that school settings can offer. UTSCC has negotiated a Workplace Agreement with staff that attempts to overcome some of this imbalance. I believe the critical conditions that assist us to recruit and retain good staff are:

- *Wages:* UTSCC pays teachers significantly above the award rates. For example, as at January 2012, our top step for a four-year trained teacher is 28 per cent more than the Educational Services (Teachers) Award per annum.
- *Recreation leave:* Full-time staff work 8.5 hours per day, and receive an RDO per month, plus 33 days annual leave per year (an extra 13 days).
- *Programming time:* Trained staff receive 1.5 hours per week for every 5 licensed places in their group. For example, a teacher responsible for programming for a 20-place room will receive 6 hours coverage from their face-to-face teaching duties to complete programming.
- *Study leave:* Staff who are completing diploma or teaching qualifications can apply for one week study leave per semester.
- *Professional development:* There is an expectation that all staff participate in professional

development and we have a generous PD budget to ensure we maintain currency in thinking and challenge and support practices. We are also very choosy about what professional development opportunities we access. We want our staff to attend training, conferences and courses that are delivered by credible presenters, come from a strong knowledge or evidence base and are current in terms of ECEC trends.

Our Workplace Agreement was negotiated prior to the introduction of the *Fair Work Act*, so it is important to consult the current legislation around this. Fair Work Australia has a step-by-step guide on making an enterprise agreement on its website and it is important that organisations seek up-to-date advice. Other good sources of information are employer associations, workplace relations lawyers, unions and some peak bodies, for example, Community Connections Solutions Australia. Our agreement is a whole of service agreement, which means that it covers all staff employed at UTSCC including teachers, childcare workers, administrative staff and cooks.

Some of the steps that we undertook that were useful to our organisation were to:

- *Be prepared in advance of negotiations.* What clauses in our expiring agreement did we feel had been ambiguous, unclear or could be written better? Complete an environment scan; what are other organisations doing in their agreements that is novel, useful or that we want to replicate? What wages level do we believe will attract the right staff?
- *Talk to staff, management and unions about what they would like to see in the agreement.* This doesn't guarantee that everything is achievable, but it does increase chances that your agreement will reflect your organisational goals and objectives to the level that they can be achieved through your industrial instrument.
- *Ensure that you have fully costed proposals.*
- *Consider unique conditions necessary for your service.* For example, being affiliated with a university means that in our service children's attendance drops during non-semester time; it is useful to UTSCC to be able to appoint a small number of staff during semester only periods and important to these staff that they have permanency of employment—so we have a clause in our agreement around this.
- *Make decisions about what workplace conditions you want to enshrine in your industrial instrument and what you will include in policy (the latter is easier to change).*
- *Communication at all stages throughout the process is vital.*