



Nick Lawson and Bobby Goldsmith Foundation Honorary Life Member, Ita Buttrose; Opposite: Nick Lawson and Bobby Goldsmith Foundation Patron, the Honourable Michael Kirby.

INVOLVE & EMPOWER

Nick Lawson on compassion, solidarity, inclusivity and the one key lesson that has helped him become a much better leader.

One of the greatest leadership lessons I've learnt so far in my career was more of a very simple epiphany than a formal instruction.

I was working in Afghanistan for Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) in 1998 and was part of a commissioned unit sent there to assist with the immediate aftermath of the Rostaq earthquake. When out in the field, it was standard practice for the fly-in fly-out NGO workers to confer then return back to their respective organisations' local HQs to work out the plan of action.

After one such conference, I walked over to our Afghan national staff to update them on

the plans we had been discussing. Their gentle and remarkably patient reply surprised me: "It is rare that we are involved in the planning but we know our country. Thank you for including us."

The humbling lesson I learnt that day is that you cannot seek to serve any community unless you involve them in the decision-making process and empower them to make their own decisions. My Afghanistan experience feels like a lifetime ago, but that learning has always stayed with me.

Last year I returned to Australia after nearly 20 years working internationally for MSF. I am fortunate enough to have stood alongside people who are facing some of the most difficult moments in the histories of their countries. I have witnessed a lot of war over the past two decades, but I now have young children and my wish is for them to grow up in a land of peace.

The CEO role came up at Bobby Goldsmith Foundation (BGF), Australia's oldest HIV charity, and I realised I was ready for a different but

familiar challenge. Having worked on the fight against HIV/AIDS in Malawi, I had some understanding of what people living with HIV (PLHIV) experience. Aside from the immediate medical needs of PLHIV, the marginalisation, social exclusion, stigma and discrimination they face is distressing and can have a significant impact on their physical and mental health.

I gained some insight into the devastating social challenges PLHIV faced in Malawi, but I was shocked to discover that these issues are still so prevalent in Australia. Despite Australia being at the forefront of the response to the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and 1990s, and having one of the lowest rates of HIV infection in the world, there are still many misunderstandings. Real stigma, discrimination and isolation exist for so many of our clients.

I'm in a rather unique position being the inaugural non-LGBTIQ CEO at BGF. I have long understood that the successful fight against HIV in Australia has been due to the LGBTIQ's community activism and resolute,

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uncompromising leadership. As rates of HIV infection increase in new communities – women, Indigenous, migrants and refugees – an effective response can only be informed by honouring and applying the lessons learnt from the LGBTIQ community, our clients and everyone with a lived HIV experience. We need to make sure that the voice and the will of PLHIV drives BGF’s decisions and agenda.

I am conscious that I do not have a lived experience of HIV and the challenges of the discrimination faced by PLHIV, but I aim to bring to my role the values of compassion, solidarity, inclusivity and empowerment.

The years I spent living and working with vulnerable populations in challenging circumstances taught me so much about the importance of treating people fairly, equally and acknowledging their humanity. We are all human and we need to support one another to grow and develop.

I have been fortunate to meet some incredible people in this role. The ones who stand out are the people who have devoted their careers to the ongoing fight against HIV, who have given and continue to give so generously; the ones with colourful life stories and the ones that we have been able to help get back on their feet and re-join their communities. I have visited clients with our case workers and I have been humbled by the human spirit that is able to overcome obstacles and still keep going.

These past months as CEO of BGF have been a period of intense growth for me as both a leader and as a human being. In BGF’s case, we strive to engage with, represent and protect the interests of PLHIV and ensure that they have a voice in all the services and programs we run.

My key learning continues to be that we can only empower our team and our clients if we involve them in our decision-making processes. **F&P**



Nick Lawson

A senior executive humanitarian professional, Nick has more than 20 years of unique expertise in the humanitarian and international development fields. Combining strong field operational leadership, strategy and policy development and implementation, and senior executive international human resource development strategies and management, Nick has directed effective humanitarian operations in multiple conflict and developing contexts. As CEO of Bobby Goldsmith Foundation, Nick oversees the provision of direct practical, emotional and financial support to the most vulnerable and disadvantaged people living with HIV.



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