

By Nora Scheinkestel

In a few weeks' time, Australians will be asked to vote on a referendum on a 'Voice'.

The Voice is about 2 things. First, the Voice will provide acknowledgement and recognition of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their wisdom and culture, borne of 65,000 years of history in this land. Despite the trauma and disadvantage that so many of their communities have endured, they have enriched, and continue to enhance, our lives with outstanding contributions in areas as diverse as the arts, music and sport. Increasingly we are recognising and learning from their wisdom in caring for our land. Their culture is a gift to our country.

Secondly, the Voice is about ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have a say in relation to laws or initiatives that will impact them. We know that consultation leads to better outcomes. It is an expression of respect.

Over 1400 people have joined an initiative called 'directors for the voice'. They are leaders drawn from every State, from small and large businesses, from not for profit and social enterprises as well as listed companies, from a range of sectors including commerce and academia, from city and country, family businesses and corporations. Every person has joined in a personal capacity and the group reflects the diversity of our society – across gender, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, political leanings, age, geographical locations, life experiences.

The one thing that is common to all of us is that, as leaders in our organisations and communities, we regularly need to assess issues that come before us. Often the information is incomplete and opinions on their impact or desirability may differ. We need to challenge the facts, assess the impacts and do our due diligence.

Those, like me, who have signed up to the 'directors for the voice' initiative, have done just that. And we have concluded that supporting the Voice is the right thing to do. We strongly support the establishment of a constitutionally enshrined Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice. We believe it is time to ensure Australia's indigenous peoples are recognised and heard. We know that imposed solutions from those who think 'they know best' don't work. As a society, we already accept this in so many aspects of our lives. We mandate consultation in areas such as town planning, health, industrial relations. Votes at company annual general meetings, even on items that are non binding such as remuneration reports, are a mechanism to consult and allow shareholder voices to be heard.

The renowned philosopher and religious leader, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks wrote: "There is something profoundly spiritual about listening. It is the most effective form of conflict resolution I know. Many things can create conflict, but what sustains it is the feeling on the part of at least one of the parties that they have not been heard. They have not been listened to. We have not "heard their pain".

Listening lies at the very heart of relationship. It means that we are open to the other, that we respect them, that their perceptions and feelings matter to us. ... A good parent listens to their child. A good employer listens to their workers. A good company listens to its customers or clients. A good leader listens to those they are leading. Listening does not mean agreeing but it does mean caring."

Every Australian voting on the referendum needs to come to their own decision. Those of us that have signed up to 'Directors for the Voice' hope that, by sharing our thinking on how we have approached this, it may assist our fellow citizens form their own views.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have asked us to walk with them in a movement of the Australian people to create a better future. They have asked for the establishment of a First Nations Voice enshrined in the constitution. So that they can be heard.

I believe we should accept that invitation and I believe better outcomes will flow both to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and to the broader community from enshrining the Voice in our constitution.