



Tania de Jong at a With One Voice rehearsal at Melbourne Sofitel

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She started The Song Room 12 years ago, a program designed to improve the educational and social outcomes of disadvantaged children by helping them tap creativity through music and other art forms. "Pot-Pourri sometimes donated time to disadvantaged schools and we were amazed that kids, even in urban locations, weren't getting access to creative learning," she says. The program has now reached some 250,000 children across Australia.

In 2008, de Jong established, "my current social enterprise/charity", Creativity Australia, with a plan to promote further the transformational power of song. Thirteen "With One Voice" choirs now bring together "diverse voices" — executives, employees, retirees, migrants, the long-term unemployed, people with depression and other disabilities—across Melbourne. Choirs now meet in the suburbs of Broadmeadows, Dandenong and Frankston, and in hotels, hospitals and banks.

"Choirs break down silos," de Jong says. "As human beings, we tend to build barriers. This is about building bridges. Our vision is to inspire people to find their voices—their sense of purpose and meaning in life, not just their singing voices."

From these choirs emanate many feel-good stories of people helping each other to find jobs, solve problems, make friends and meet people they would be unlikely to encounter in their everyday lives. De Jong is chuffed by the outcomes, but by no means finished. Most recently, she's set up Creative Universe, a catch-all entity for a series of "channels for change". It runs Inspiring Minds Inspiring Lives, a leadership program that works with executive teams in corporations, including ANZ, BHP-Billiton, Telstra, fabric retailer Spotlight and consulting groups, McKinsey & Co and PricewaterhouseCoopers.

Recognised in 2008 with an Order of Australia for her community efforts, de Jong became a public and corporate speaker – albeit one who's apt to burst into song. Helping the business world nurture its creative side seemed the next step, she says. "I wanted to get people thinking more with the right sides of their brains, take them out of their comfort zones, put them in a can-do head-space."

Typically, she will work with corporate leaders who say they can't sing and, "by the end of the session they're singing an African gospel song in parts and in harmony – with actions".

HROUGH HER WORK with forward-planning corporations, de Jong quickly became alert to major issues such as new technology, the importance of keeping Gen Y employees engaged and developing cultures of innovation. "I was attending future-looking conferences and noticing people were disengaged, on their iPhones. I wanted to change the paradigm."

Her latest venture is Creative Innovation, an international business conference launched last year, which brought Edward de Bono, the inventor of lateral thinking, and others to Australia. At the time of this interview, de Jong was finalising the line-up for Ci2011 and had already signed a bunch of 35 crowd-pleasers, including US inventor and futurist Raymond Kurzweil, whom *Forbes* magazine called the "ultimate thinking machine", philosopher and cognitive scientist Daniel Dennett, and de Bono. The conference offers scholarships to emerging innovators who are required to make a pitch in 60 seconds.

Where does de Jong's creative spirit come from? Her maternal grandparents were Polish refugees who escaped the Holocaust and came to Australia with nothing. Her grandfather, Karl Duldig, was an acclaimed sculptor, and her art teacher grandmother, Slawa, created the world's first folding umbrella (patented in 1929). Their home in Melbourne's East Malvern is now a museum.

However, de Jong didn't discuss her background much until quite recently. "I was always taken to art galleries as a kid," she says. "Once I was asked to name my favourite rock band – and I said Beethoven."

These days, her musical tastes are more eclectic, and she cites as favourites Leonard Cohen's *Hallelujah*, Ennio Morricone's *Love Theme* from *Cinema Paradiso*, the opera *La Bohème* and the adagietto from Mahler's fifth symphony.